

*Shifter!*

Chris screamed as her face erupted into a muzzle filled with sharp teeth. She screamed as her feet exploded out of her shoes. Her jeans bulged and caused her even more pain before they too succumbed to her changed body. Her stomach shifted, and her heart thundered as it moved to accommodate her new physique. Her kidneys, her liver—everything was moving and burning. Fur covered her in seconds and her ears lengthened. She howled like the animal she was, an animal in pain. Claws scrabbled desperately at concrete trying to find purchase.

“Help me!” she screamed.

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# **Wolf's Revenge**

by

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Published by Impulse Books UK

First published by Impulse Books UK March 2005  
<http://www.impulsebooks.co.uk>

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Cover Design: Samantha Wall

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A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 0-9545122-6-x



Printed and bound in Great Britain  
Impulse Books UK

## **Acknowledgments**

Special thanks go to Sylverre, Terri, Anne, Scott, Arlene, Sharon, Star, Rob, Erick, Lindi, and all the others hanging out at my favourite writing group. Last but not least, I want to thank Dave Milne and Martin Fennel for reading an early draft of this book and telling me the truth.

Thanks everyone.



## Murder

Lieutenant Chris Humber flashed her badge at the uniformed officer as she swept through the police lines. It looked as if this one had generated a lot of attention. She ignored the cameras buzzing overhead and the media shouting questions as she always did. She was a police officer, not some kind of soap star. One voice sounded more strident than the others—Ed Davis, darling of Channel 5 viewers everywhere. She was careful not to achieve eye contact with him.

“I think he likes you,” Ken said dryly.

She grimaced. “I’d like to run him in as a material witness.”

“I don’t think Cappy would go for that.”

“Probably not, but it would be fun to try. How did he do it?”

“Do what?”

Chris waved a hand at the cameras hovering over the scene with their little rotors whirring busily away. “Get here before us. We got the call what... ten minutes ago?”

Ken shrugged. “About that.”

“Ten minutes, and Channel 5 is already set up and filming the body.”

Ken didn't comment; he was busy. As her assistant, he had charge of their crime scene kit, the major component of which was a headset for recording audiovisual impressions of a scene. He gently polished the lens of the video pickup as they made their way along the alley, and then inspected it critically. Apparently satisfied, he put on the unit and activated it before adjusting the microphone that followed the line of his jaw.

"Investigating possible homicide. Case number three-niner-zero, slash two-niner-one. Primary investigating officer: Lieutenant Chris Humber. Also in attendance: Detective Ken Hart—assistant and current operator. Victim is a white male..."

Chris listened as Ken described the scene for the record. The victim, a white male about thirty to thirty-five years of age, lay in a lake of blood staring at the sky with a very surprised look on his face. He'd had his throat ripped out. His clothes appeared to be his Sunday best and his mousey-blond hair looked freshly cut. He hadn't been dead long; the blood was still wet.

"Someone was out partying last night," Chris said.

Ken raised an eyebrow. "How do you figure?"

"He's wearing his glad rags, and that's not a tattoo on the back of his hand."

Ken bent to get a closer look and carefully recorded what he saw. "That was awesome." He straightened and grinned when Chris rolled her eyes at him. "Here less than a minute and you've got it figured out. Seriously, Chris, I'm impressed."

"Cut it out. You would have seen the stamp eventually."

"Probably, but you saw it without half looking!"

"I was lucky. So, he was partying at Area 51?"

"Looks like it. The stamp's still pretty fresh."

Area 51 used a distinctive stamp—the numerals 5 and 1 in purple ink surrounded by a red circle. They would have to check the ink's authenticity in a lab to be sure. If genuine, it would prove to be coded at the molecular level, and should

match Area 51's unique and licensed brand. The club itself wasn't too far away, but the alley wasn't a convenient route to and from it. Chris wondered if the victim had entered it voluntarily.

Ken paced slowly around the body; as always, he was careful to document a scene from all possible angles. Chris stepped back to let him pass, and something crunched under her foot—a piece of glass. She crouched, pulling on a pair of latex gloves, and nudged it with a fingertip. Pieces of glass were scattered all around the alley—broken bottles amid the detritus that always accumulated in such places, but this shard was flat and clear. She looked around trying to find a source, but Ken interrupted her.

He nudged her shoulder. "Look there."

She turned to look. "What the hell is Meckler doing here?"

Doctor Meckler was the coroner. As far as she knew, he spent all his time at the city morgue. He had too much seniority for this sort of thing, and plenty of underlings to attend scenes like this.

"I never thought to see him outside the morgue."

She nodded. "Me neither. I guess he must live somewhere, right? He can't stay in the morgue *all* the time can he?"

"No?" Ken asked as Chris went to intercept Meckler.

Meckler was chatting with his assistant when Chris joined him. He nodded to her, and together they went to have a look at the victim. Ken had resumed recording while he carefully searched the victim's pockets for identification.

Chris watched the search. "Anything?"

"We have a wallet and driver's license in the name of Vincent Fairman."

"Things are looking up."

"Not for Vincent, Lieutenant," Meckler said, beginning his preliminary examination. He pointed to something, and his assistant leaned forward for a better look at the victim's ravaged throat. He nodded, and retrieved something using a

pair of tweezers. "Bag it, Samuel."

"Yes, Sir," Samuel said and did that. "Sir?"

"Hmmm?"

"Did you notice his teeth?"

Meckler beamed. "I knew I was right about you, Samuel. Yes I did notice, but well done all the same."

Samuel swelled at the praise.

Chris frowned and crouched beside the body. Her eyes widened when she saw what Samuel had found. Vincent's teeth had no business being in a human mouth. His canines were long and pointed like those of a dog... or a wolf. She shook her head. She shouldn't have missed that. Vincent had been a shifter, which made his death even more of a puzzle.

"What is it?" Ken asked.

"He's a shifter," she said, rising to her feet. She had always prided herself on noticing details; it annoyed her that Meckler had found this one before her.

"*Was* a shifter, Lieutenant," Meckler qualified. "Past tense now you know."

Ken bent to look. "How did we miss that?"

Meckler removed the victim's shoes and socks. "Did you have any reason to suspect he was a shifter?"

Chris shook her head.

"I didn't think so." Meckler frowned at the lack of lividity in the victim's feet and calves. "Samuel, take his temperature would you?"

"Yes, Sir."

Ken crouched. "Can you open his mouth just a little more for the record?"

Samuel nodded and parted the victim's lips.

"Thanks."

"No prob."

Meckler checked for more wounds, but there seemed to be none, not even defensive wounds. The back of the victim's head interested him, and also the lack of lividity in his feet and calves of his legs. When blood settled into the lowest part of a

corpse, it turned the flesh purple. Lividity was one of the ways used to estimate time of death. The lack of defensive wounds suggested to Chris that a vamp had killed Vincent—a vampire could use mind tricks to prevent its victims from struggling. She supposed he could have been surprised by someone he knew, but that seemed unlikely to her. Shifters were fast and strong; they weren't easily taken by surprise.

She listened as Meckler explained to Samuel the procedures he liked to use. The young assistant was obviously a new member of the team and soaked up his words like a sponge. Meckler double-checked his work including the temperature readings.

Ken flicked a finger against the driver's license he held. "I'm going to run this. Maybe Vincent has a record."

She nodded. "Good idea."

Ken went back to the car.

"That's about all we can do for now," Meckler said, and Samuel packed away their equipment.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"About what?"

She nodded at the corpse.

"Well... he's dead," Meckler said and Samuel grinned. "Died sometime last night—within the last few hours I'd say. Before you ask, no, I can't be more specific. You'll get the time of death when I write my report."

"A vamp do him?"

Meckler scowled. "You should know better than to push me into hasty declarations, Lieutenant. All I'm willing to say is that he died this morning of massive blood loss via the jugular—for want of a more poetic term, his throat was ripped out."

"I could've told you that!" she said crossly. "Give me something I don't know."

"Well, he didn't have time to shift his shape. The teeth don't count. Shifters who spend too much time in animal form take on their beast's characteristics. This young man

seems to have bucked the trend a little. Instead of his eyes staying fixed, it was his teeth.”

“Unusual?”

“Not especially, and quite convenient from his point of view. He could pass for human as long as he kept his mouth shut, which is not something you can do if your eyes have slit pupils or glow in the dark. I once had a guest at my facility with a full set of claws on each hand. Strangest damn thing I ever saw. I’m sure you noticed the blood.”

“Of course. What about it?”

“There’s not enough of it.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No. Oh, there’s a good amount here, don’t get me wrong. I’m not suggesting a vampire fed on him—not yet at least. Throat wounds are messy. There should be spatter over a wide area.” He waved a hand at the ground. “He bled out here, but I doubt he was attacked here. No spatter and not much blood left in the body. It might be worth your time looking for the rest.”

She frowned. If this was a body dump and not the actual murder scene, she might never solve the case. Any evidence to be found would most likely be waiting where the attack occurred. There was nothing to indicate the murder happened anywhere else, but... she looked up. The fire escape maybe?

Meckler followed her gaze and nodded. “Could be.”

“We’ll check it out.”

Meckler nodded again. “Come along, Samuel.”

Chris waved the med techs over to bag and transport the body to Meckler’s hotel for the terminally dead. While the Doctor led his puppy-like assistant away, she scouted around the alley hoping to get lucky. She ignored the arrival of the CSU forensic team. The white-coverall-clad men and women were setting up to conduct a meticulous search of the alley with their robotic sensors and probes. If there was anything to find, they would find it.

Ken returned, stepping carefully around the forensic team

and watching where he put his feet. "Our Vincent has a sheet a mile long,"

"Oh, really?"

"He did his apprenticeship in carjacking, for which he served three years. When he got out, he tried his hand at extortion and robbery—served a total of five for that. He got himself deported from Luna for pushing hallucinogenics to the miners there—some guy got killed when he went for a walk on the surface without his suit. Must have thought he was on the beach or something. When Vincent got back here, he went straight for a while—"

"Or he didn't get caught," Chris interjected.

"—but then he went down for assault with a deadly. Got out a year ago and disappeared off our scanners."

"Until now."

Ken nodded.

"I doubt he went legit, so maybe this was just business."

"You think he crossed someone, maybe did something worth killing him for?"

She shrugged. "Don't know... maybe. Meckler says he lost a lot of blood."

"I can see it."

"Har-de-har. I mean he really lost it. It's not here. Have we got an address?"

"Not one that's current. What we have puts him out of state as of two months ago—traffic violation."

She nodded, staring up at that inviting fire escape. Her eyes narrowed when she noticed a curtain flapping in the breeze. Thinking about broken glass and a lack of blood, she shielded her eyes to see better, but she couldn't tell if the window was intact or not.

"Hell, I'll have to check it out. I'll go nuts wondering about it."

"Check what?" Ken asked, trying to find what she was looking at.

"See that open window... fifth floor third from the left?"

Ken shaded his eyes and looked up at the building. “Uh huh, you think someone tossed him out?”

“Maybe they attacked him up there and he jumped out. Shifters are tough, but tough enough to make that jump?” she shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe he would try it if he was desperate enough. Maybe he tried for the fire escape and fell.”

“Let’s go see,” Ken said.

“Let’s.”

It wasn’t as easy as that though. The removal of the body had lessened people’s interest in the scene, but not altogether. Channel 5 was doing a live report, and had dragged up the usual crime statistics for the area. She watched as Ed Davis held forth on the Department’s lack of will to tackle the problem.

She scowled, hunched her shoulders, and hoped not to get noticed. It wasn’t lack of will on her or the Department’s part that had allowed crime to spiral; the Mayor and his liberal policies were to blame. Under funding was the direct result of a Chief of Police more interested in making the Mayor happy than in controlling crime. She had requested stakeouts and been refused due to lack of manpower or funding so many times, she had come to expect it. Cappy did his best by prioritizing the Department’s caseload, but that meant many cases were deemed of lesser concern—most notably those like her current one, which looked more and more like a monster on monster crime. Such cases ranked alongside vampire slayings, a *crime* no one but the vamps cared about, and shootouts between rival gangs, where no one but the guilty were hurt.

She knew that Cappy would give her two days at most on Vincent Fairman. After that, she would be required to shunt the case into storage where it would remain open but inactive in the Department’s archives. Inactive files outnumbered the active by a significant amount, and she rarely had the luxury to go back to them.

"Lieutenant Humber!" Davis called and the cameras panned toward her. "Have you a statement regarding this heinous crime?"

"Heinous? He's been reading up," Ken muttered under his breath.

Chris snorted. "I have no comment to make at this time, except to say that the investigation is proceeding."

Davis blocked her progress and played to his audience. "Come now, Lieutenant, you must realize that tensions are running high within the shifter community. Not since the urban revolt of 2024, has the preternatural issue been so solidly in the forefront of people's thoughts. Three mysterious deaths in a little over a week, and now a fourth right here in Monster Central. People are beginning to smell a cover up."

Chris' eyes narrowed and Davis' smile turned sickly. She didn't appreciate the implication of a cover up and he knew it, but alarm bells rang in her head at his mention of the other dead shifters. Could there be a connection between Fairman and those other deaths? Baxter was primary on those cases, not her, but she would have heard through the grapevine if a single killer was being sought for those deaths.

"Who says a shifter is involved here?" she asked.

"Vincent Fairman *was* a shifter, Lieutenant. Doctor Meckler mentioned it not five minutes ago. Are you denying a link exists between this death and the three previous slayings?"

*Meckler mentioned it... I'll kill him!*

"I can neither confirm nor deny any such link at this time. Now if you will excuse me, I have work."

Coldly furious at Meckler for being so stupid, she pushed through the crush and stormed up the steps to the building that backed onto the alley.

"That was Lieutenant Chris Humber, primary investigating officer of the latest in a spree of brutal shifter slayings," Davis continued unconcerned by her lack of cooperation. "With the police at an apparent loss..."

“Meckler should know better,” Ken hissed.

“Maybe it wasn’t him. Meckler is an old hand. He *does* know better than to mouth off about a case, let alone one of mine.”

“But good old Ed said—”

“Maybe he just wanted to yank my chain. He doesn’t like me, remember?”

Ken snorted. Ignoring the protests of the rust-spotted robot guarding the entrance, he held the door open for her. “Why the hell you ever let yourself get involved with him I’ll never know. I warned you—”

“Don’t start. Just don’t start okay, Ken? I’m not in the mood for one of your lectures, especially not one about my love life.”

Ken grumbled something under his breath that she did her best to ignore. The robot attempted to follow them through the door and prevent their further progress into the building. Ken waved his badge at the scanner plate that comprised its face, and it apologized. It reversed course back out the door.

“Stupid thing,” Ken grumped.

They found the building supervisor—Frank Goodwin it said on his door—in his office with his feet up watching a rerun of yesterday’s ball game. Ken sidled around the desk trying to see the screen. Chris had little interest in the game. She preferred hockey.

She offered her badge for Goodwin’s inspection. “Lieutenant Humber. Your fellow fan there is Detective Hart. I need to ask you a couple of questions, Mr. Goodwin.”

Goodwin dropped his feet to the floor and stood. “If you’ve come about the permits, you’re wasting your time. The owners cleared all that up just last week.”

“I’m not here about that—”

“The health inspection then?”

“No. I need to know if you have a tenant by the name of Vincent Fairman living here.”

Goodwin nodded. “Vince moved in last month. Is there

a problem?”

“You might say so. He was found dead in the alley running behind this building.”

“Goddess... poor Vince. I saw all the police outside, but I thought they were raiding Zero Gee again. Worst thing they ever did letting that place open its doors. Vince dead... an accident?”

“No. I need to see his room.”

Goodwin unlocked his desk drawer and retrieved a key card. “Master key,” he said going for the door. “You’ll want copies of the security discs too, I suppose?”

“Absolutely,” Ken said sounding surprised. “This is an old building, are there cameras on all the floors?”

“Cameras yes, but the locks aren’t the best. The owners wouldn’t pay for the scheduled upgrades.”

“Record on, Ken,” Chris said. Ken activated his equipment and nodded his readiness. “What can you tell us about Fairman?”

Goodwin led them to an elevator and joined them inside. “The agency we use sent him over. We had a vacancy when one of our older tenants died—heart attack. I didn’t have time to clear out old John’s stuff, but Vince said he didn’t mind taking care of it. He took it all down to the shelter—some of it was pretty good.”

“You liked him.”

“Yeah, I guess so. He’s quiet—never any trouble out of him. Not like some I could name.”

“Anyone asking around about him, visitors, a girlfriend maybe?”

Goodwin shook his head. “He kept to himself. Like I said, he’s the quiet sort... *was* the quiet sort. Poor Vince, I can’t believe he’s dead.”

Ken looked at Chris over the supervisor’s shoulder and raised an eyebrow. She rolled her eyes in return. One thing Vincent Fairman hadn’t been was the quiet sort. From his record, she knew he’d had a tendency toward violence. Nice

wasn't one of his qualities.

"You get any problems with shifters around here?" she asked, watching the indicator lights above the elevator doors.

"Nah, they know better."

"How's that?"

Goodwin grinned. "They don't call it Monster Central for nothing. The local packs won't stand for outsiders causing a ruckus."

"What about the locals, any problems there?"

Goodwin looked sideways at her as if unsure she was serious. "No."

The elevator doors opened and Goodwin led them to Vincent's apartment, but when he reached to unlock the door with his master key, he found it already ajar. Chris moved him carefully to one side, drew her weapon, and nudged the door with a foot.

Ken peered inside. "Well, that answers that."

She nodded. Vincent's apartment had been trashed. "We need forensics up here."

"I'll take care of it," Ken said and used his link to contact Central.

"You stay out here, Mr. Goodwin," she said and stepped into the apartment.

The window she had seen from the alley was directly opposite the door. It had been smashed outward, outward and not in because when she looked, she found shards of glass on the fire escape. She noted the Dumpsters in the alley directly below her, and made a note to check them for anything interesting. There were bloody handprints on the railing of the fire escape—probably belonging to the victim, but CSU would tell her for sure. The blood missing from the alley was here in abundance. Spatter covered the window frame and the wall just below it. She prodded the carpet with the toe of her shoe. It still squelched. She didn't doubt that someone had attacked Vincent here. Maybe the perp followed him home from Area 51. It was worth looking into. The attack must have

occurred by surprise—the lack of defensive wounds seemed to suggest it at least. Vincent had probably tried to escape by going out the window, but his injury had proved too severe. He either fell or climbed down to the alley, but his strength had given out on him. He died alone choking on blood.

Ken joined her by the window, careful not to tread on the sodden area of the carpet. “Forensics is on the way.” He began recording the broken window and the bloody carpet. Panning around the room, he pointed to the communications centre. “Message light is flashing.”

Vincent’s link was a bottom of the range model; the controls were easy to figure out. Messages were saved on a reusable disc in the base of the unit, but rather than remove it right away, she pulled on a fresh pair of surgical gloves and pressed the menu button. There were a couple of messages stored from someone named Tony. She played both. One was a simple request for Vincent to contact him. The second was far more interesting.

*“Vince its Tony, are you there? Pick up if you’re there... okay listen, we have to meet. Danny is dead and I think Marty is too. No one has seen him. Some guy was asking around about you and Jay this morning. It’s got to be that fucking tight-assed Ryder. If you don’t get in touch, I’m going to the boss with what I know. I don’t know what else to do. Call me, okay?”*

“Well now,” Ken said. “We have ourselves a suspect. Goody.”

Chris nodded thoughtfully and retrieved the disc. She held it up and watched the light reflect in a rainbow of colors, knowing it represented their only lead. She needed to think of a way to make it seem more than it was. When Cappy called her into his office and insisted she archive the case, as he inevitably would, she wanted to have her argument ready. Shifter or not,

Vincent did not deserve to die like an animal in a dirty alley. Many would dispute that, insisting that an animal is exactly what he was, but although she did sympathize with that view in some ways—shifters weren't human after all—she drew the line at breaking the law. Killing shifters in the Republic was illegal. Until made legal again, which it never would be for fear of international condemnation, she would hunt down the perpetrators of such crimes and bring them to justice.

"Ryder... no first name," she mused. "Not much of a suspect, but better than nothing I guess. We can ask around, see if anyone named Jay or Danny has turned up dead. That might lead us to a connection we can use."

"Baxter is working on the Shifter Slayings..." Ken began. Chris narrowed her eyes at his use of the media headline, and he quickly altered what he was going to say. "I mean he's investigating three homicides concerning dead shifters. Maybe—"

"Maybe we should hand Vincent over to him and concentrate on our other cases... on our *human* victims. Is that what you were going to say?"

"Don't say it like that. You know I didn't mean it that way."

She sighed. "Yeah I know. Sorry."

"It's just that Baxter is already working a case like this. Maybe this one really is connected."

Vincent's killer *could* have killed the others, but the method used was completely different. Baxter's shifters had been killed with readily identifiable weapons—guns and knives, but Vincent died at the hands of another shifter or something worse, like a vamp. His throat was torn out by hand or claw. That was her assumption anyway, an assumption she hoped Meckler would verify when he made his report. Baxter had his eye on AML supporters for his perp; they were all human of course. She had no doubt that the Anti Monster League was capable of killing those shifters. It was their avowed purpose to rid the Republic of all monsters—meaning non-humans—no

matter their species or form. She tried to imagine an unarmed human ripping someone's throat out, but she couldn't, and especially not if that someone was a shifter. Nothing human killed Vincent; she was sure of it.

"I'll think about it," she said to mollify Ken. "I can at least ask him about the possibility. He might not want the case."

"Why wouldn't he? It's high profile."

"The shifter angle is the only thing linking this case to his. The methods, the murder weapon... even the locales are different. I don't think they're linked, Ken. Baxter might—he's been working his case longer and might have an angle—but I doubt it. We'll see."

"Fair enough."

Chris bagged the disc and labeled it with the case number. She would log it in for analysis after she had made a copy for herself back at Central.

"Let's snag the security disc from Goodwin and get back. I want a word with Baxter soonest."

Ken nodded and led the way out.

"Where the hell is Humber?" Captain Stokes yelled over the noise of his busy department. A few faces looked up from their comps, or broke off from conversations to point in Chris' direction. "In my office, now!"

Chris sighed. She had barely sat down at her comp to make a copy of Vincent's message disc. She stood up as if on her way, but as soon as Cappy re-entered his office, she sat down again and quickly copied the disc. It took less than half a minute. She extracted the original from her comp the instant the duplicate was ready. On the way to Cappy's office, she labeled a case and tucked the original disc inside. She stopped at Detective Carlson's desk on the way. He was reading through a stack of reports.

"Hey, Jimmy, do me a favor?"

Carlson smiled up at her. "Sure, Chris, what do you need?"

"You couldn't get this down to the geeks for me could you?"

"Sure, no problem."

"Thanks." She handed the cases containing the security and message discs to him along with a request for a full analysis. "Just drop the receipt on my desk if I'm not back."

"Okay."

"Thanks," she said again and hurried to see what Cappy wanted. Ken joined her on the way, and they entered the office together. "What's up?" she asked, eyeing Baxter and the unfamiliar face beside him.

"Sit," Cappy said, pointing at the remaining chair.

"Should I go?" Ken asked, already backing toward the door.

Cappy glared at him. "Stay!"

"I'll just stand over here then shall I...? I'll stand over here, Sir."

Ken leaned against the wall next to the door.

Chris took a seat eyeing Baxter. His eyes flicked to the unfamiliar woman in warning, and a little headshake told Chris to be careful. She didn't know why she should. The stranger had yet to do or say anything threatening. The woman was a glowing beauty. Her high cheekbones, her posture, her hair styled within an inch of its life... she wouldn't have been out of place in Style Magazine, but here? Ken stared as if trying to memorize the vision and Chris scowled. The outsider smiled at him gently, and then let it widen when she looked at Chris. She had perfect white teeth.

*Damn!*

She wore a matching light-grey jacket and knee length skirt obviously designed to radiate power and prestige. Her too innocent expression sounded warning bells in Chris' brain, and so did the fact that it didn't reach the woman's eyes. They were hard and calculating. She wore makeup she didn't need, as if trying to dull her radiance rather than enhance it. The painfully white blouse she wore was open two buttons too

many, and displayed more than the heavy gold cross and chain around her neck. She wasn't wearing a bra.

*Tacky, very tacky.*

"Chris, this is Special Agent Flint," Cappy said. "Agent Flint, this is Lieutenant Humber currently assigned as primary for the cases in question."

Baxter scowled.

"Pleased to meet you," Flint said, not offering to shake hands.

*Lord and Lady, even her voice promises sex!*

"Same here," she said not meaning it. Why had no one mentioned the Feds were involved in this? "Cases in question?"

A smile briefly appeared on Flint's face and then fled. "I'll let Captain Stokes explain."

She turned to Cappy. "Explain what?"

"The Chief has expressed... *concern* regarding the recent spree of shifter slayings—his words. That means someone with clout has been pressuring the Mayor to do something proactive for a change." Cappy smiled at that. "He in turn has been pressuring Chief Simpson, who pressured Commander Watson, who in turn pressured... yada, yada, yada. You get the picture. Now it's my turn to pressure you, Chris."

"But I'm not primary on those cases, Baxter is. I was going to give him Vincent Fairman too. I doubt the case is linked to his—"

"It is," Baxter growled.

"—but... *it is?* I've only just got back from the scene. How can you know that?"

"All the victims spent time together in Green Haven."

Green Haven was a maximum-security prison in Dutchess County. Vincent had spent some time there for assault with a deadly weapon. If not for his species, he wouldn't have been put in maximum security, but shifters were seriously dangerous individuals. Anything less than maximum security begged for escapes on a daily basis.

“And they all worked for the same man,” Flint chimed in.

“Who was their employer?”

Flint handed her a color brochure. “Collard Freight. It’s a reasonably successful shipping company supplying various essentials to the mining colonies. They have warehousing and offices here.”

Chris paged through the brochure noting the colorful pictures of happy smiling faces working with shipping crates or loaders. The ships were idealized versions of the real thing, the sky azure blue, and the sun always shone. On the last page she found the photograph of a man sitting behind a desk smiling for the camera; the legend beneath read: *John S. Hatch -- CEO Collard Freight.*

“What do we know about this Hatch character?”

Baxter shrugged. “He’s clean at first glance. I’ve put in a request for a deep search into his background. The geeks tell me we’ll know more in a day or two. On the surface, he’s exactly what he appears: a wealthy businessman.”

“One who employs shifter heavies,” Ken put in.

Flint shrugged. “So what else is new? Companies using shifters instead of guard dogs are pretty common these days. Lephmann saw to that with his NSPCL nonsense.”

Chris agreed with a firm nod. Trying to take something a shifter had been set to guard was close to suicidal. Nothing but a more powerful monster, or a human with a very big gun loaded with silver, could hope to take one on with any hope of success.

“I’m assigning you as primary for Fairman and the others, Chris,” Cappy said. “Baxter will turn over everything he has on the case to you.”

“But I don’t want it!”

“Did you say something?” Cappy asked coldly. “Since when do you have a say in what orders you will obey? The Chief wants whatever the Mayor wants, and the Mayor wants re-election! He told Simpson to call in the feebies; Flint being

here is the result and she wants you as primary.”

She turned to Flint and demanded, “Why?”

“Because of the shifter angle. Your reports on the Stanton case make very interesting reading. You tracked him, hounded him, and almost took him out. No one else has come close.”

“Stanton is dead, but even if he weren’t, you can’t tell me you believe he would dirty his hands with killing shifters.”

“Stanton is capable of almost anything, but no, I’m not saying he’s behind these murders. I’ve been tasked with helping you track down the one responsible for these deaths, and that’s what I will do.”

Flint was hiding something, but Chris believed she meant what she said. “I have a partner.”

“Now you have two.”

“Cappy?”

Cappy shook his head. “Sorry, Chris, it’s out of my hands. This is top priority. I’ll reassign your other cases.”

She drew a sharp breath. Someone else taking over her cases... Baxter maybe? She eyed him speculatively. He grimaced back at her knowing how she felt. Her files were under her personal seal, but if ordered to give him access, she would have to obey. All her sources; names, dates, everything was in there. She would have to purge those files. She couldn’t betray her weasels by allowing their details to fall into another’s hands.

She stood, preparing to leave. “If there’s nothing else, I have a lot of catch up reading to do.”

Cappy nodded and gestured at Baxter. “Dave will go over what we know so far and get you up to speed.”

Taking Cappy’s words as his dismissal, Baxter stood to join Chris and Ken as they left. Flint made to do the same.

“Agent Flint, may I have a word before you leave?”

“Of course, Captain...”

The door closing prevented Chris from hearing anything further.

She made her way to her desk thinking about purging her

files. She would make copies first, and then give Baxter access to the edited originals. No doubt he wanted to do similar things with his own files.

“Give me an hour would you?”

Baxter nodded and went to his own desk.

Ken looked back at Cappy’s door. “You really don’t like her do you?”

“What’s to like? Look Ken, I don’t know her and I don’t trust her.”

“You don’t trust anyone!”

“I trust you, and I trust Cappy. I don’t trust feds that stick their noses in my business and then play games about their reasons. Flint has her own agenda; I’d stake my pension on it... such as it is.”

“You think so? She seemed nice enough to me. A little pushy maybe, but she would have to be to make it as far as she has.”

She rolled her eyes. “Stop thinking with your balls and use your brain.”

“I resent that! So she’s attractive, so what? I’ve been in the job long enough not to be swayed by a pretty face. I held out against you didn’t I?”

Chris snorted. She knew what she was, and a pretty face wasn’t it. Flint was sex on legs. Ken would have to be stone not to realize it, or any man for that matter.

She sat at her desk and furtively pinched the flesh at her ribs. Was she putting on weight? She shrugged. So what if she had a little meat on her bones? Mark liked her body well enough, and that satisfied her. She smoothed her sweater and tried to think about work. Thoughts of her fiancé she did not need right now.

“Well didn’t I?”

She smiled. “Yeah you did, now let’s get to work on this. I’ll be damned if I’ll give my sources to anyone. They trust me to protect them.”

“You won’t let them down, Chris, they know that.”

## Questions

Her second day on the case, Chris arrived at Central bright and early determined to light a fire under the geeks. Along with the unwanted participation of the FBI in the form of Agent Flint, Chris had been given the authority to requisition almost limitless manpower and resources. In some ways, it was gratifying to know that her superiors trusted her with such power, but it also had the effect of ramping up the pressure on her. The brass would expect results and fast.

She parked close to the entrance, pleased to have beaten out a claim jumper who saw the space at the same moment she did. She smirked and trotted up the steps to Central's main doors. There was the usual weekday chaos inside. Uniformed and plain-clothes officers coming and going, civilians visiting for one reason or another, suited attorneys hurrying toward Visitor's Reception to ask where their clients were being detained. She dismissed the chaos as normal and headed for the elevators.

Central was housed in a purpose-built building; it had been moved to its current location from 6<sup>th</sup> Street in 2026. The Urban Revolt forced massive changes in policing the city. The result of one of those changes was an entirely new Central

Bureau that no longer simply oversaw operations in areas such as Newton, Rampart, and Monster Central, but instead took active control of them and many others. Community policing still had a place, but the Urban Revolt had shown that a strong centralized authority could react much faster to emergencies, and was more efficient in dispatching assets to quell public unrest. She had seen riots during her years in uniform. There was nothing worse than facing rampaging shifters. She would never forget facing them down with nothing but an assault rifle and a bellyful of fear.

Chris rode the elevator up to the second floor.

The techno geeks of the Cyber Analysis Division operated out of the second floor of Central to examine electronic evidence of all kinds. The data held on security discs, comps, and even in a robot's memory could be critical to cracking a case. There were two kinds of geek on the second floor—the Cads and the Cats. The Cads, named for their division, were hardly cops at all. They spent all their time at Central taking computers apart, or analyzing data in minute detail. In her opinion, they belonged in the crime lab across town where every other type of evidence was secured and studied. The brass thought otherwise. The grandiosely named Cyber Action Teams, or Cats, acted like cops but most agreed they were just another species of geek. They investigated cyber crime such as computer fraud or Infonet security breaches, collecting evidence for the Cads to analyze back at Central, and then acting upon what they found.

She stepped off the elevator and headed for DD's cubicle. She had specifically requested Donna Delgado be assigned to her case, because she liked Donna and knew they worked well together. Chris threaded her way between the cubicles—most of them unmanned this early in the morning—and found Delgado slumped over her desk asleep, still wearing the headphones she habitually wore. Chris went to the coffee machine and bought two cups, before returning to awaken DD.

She lifted one earphone. "Oh Deee Deee," she whispered, and then yelled, "*wake up!*" She let the earphone snap back in place.

Delgado shot to her feet blinking her bleary eyes. "Yes, sir! I'm awake, sir! I wasn't doing... Chris?"

She grinned and sat on the corner of Delgado's cluttered desk. "Coffee?"

"You cow, I nearly wet myself!" Delgado spluttered, but she took the offered cup and took a sip. She grimaced. "This is disgusting." She gulped another mouthful and took off her headphones. "What time is it?"

She glanced at her watch. "Half seven."

"In the *morning*?"

She nodded.

Delgado groaned and slumped into her chair. "I did it again."

"You slept over?"

Delgado nodded miserably and winced. She massaged her neck. "I have no life."

Chris took Delgado's empty cup and replaced it with the full one. "Drink this, and you'll feel better."

"I'm serious, Chris. I have no life. I live in this cubicle twenty-four hours a day and for what?"

"Six-fifty a week after tax?"

"Yeah."

"Stop beating yourself up, DD. So you're a geek, you can't help it."

Delgado snorted and drank her second coffee. "If I worked in the private sector, I could rake in ten times what I'm earning now. I was head-hunted once!"

Chris grinned. Delgado always fell back on that. Techtron—one of the biggest corporations in the computer industry—had apparently asked Delgado to join them straight from college, but she had declined. She had been hot to join the force and catch bad guys, but the academy instructors had other ideas. They were trained to spot talent, and Delgado had

it coming out of her ears where tech was concerned. So here she was, and here she would stay.

“You’re the best, DD.”

“Damn straight.”

“Besides, that you have no life works for me. It means I know where to find you.”

Delgado growled.

“Seriously. It’s reassuring to know that when I need a geek, you’re always here for me.”

“Don’t rub it in.”

She smiled. “Okay, let’s get serious. You’re mine for a while. Did they tell you that?”

“Dick called me into his office and gave me your stuff. That’s why I’m still here and not in bed. You owe me big time.”

“Hold that thought.” Chris spotted a chair in an empty cubicle and snagged it before its owner arrived to claim it. She wheeled it into Delgado’s cubicle and sat. “Nail me a suspect, and one of my tickets for the Kings vs. Islanders’ game is yours.”

Delgado’s eyes widened. “Bullshit! You haven’t got ’em. They sold out weeks ago.”

Although Mark preferred baseball, she had planned to take him to the game in an effort to teach him the error of his ways. Ice hockey was one of very few things they didn’t see eye-to-eye on, and the next game was an important one. The Kings needed a win, and the NY Islanders were still holding a grudge after their last defeat. Like Chris, Delgado was a big Kings’ fan.

“Oh, I’ve got ’em all right. I’m taking Mark.”

“You don’t want to do that, Chris. He’s no Kings’ fan. Besides, you’ll look too eager to please. Now I on the other hand—”

“Can be bought?”

“That’s harsh. I was about to say that I would kill to see that game!”

They laughed together.

"Give me something good, DD, and I'll take you to see the Kings beat the Islanders. Deal?"

"Deal," Delgado said and reached for a folder. "Look at this."

The folder contained fuzzy photographs of the corridor outside Vincent Fairman's apartment. The lighting had been bad, and the security system in his building wasn't the best on the market, nor was it the second best. It was trash, and the stills taken from the disc were little better than useless. She flicked through them and stopped when she found Vincent unlocking his door. Although the picture was fuzzy, she recognized him by his clothes. The time printed on the photo indicated he had arrived home in the early hours of the morning. No surprise. The next few photos showed other people coming or going; she would need to track each one down and eliminate them as suspects. The last few pictures showed a man wearing a dark coat and navy-blue cap stopping outside Vincent's door, and reaching toward the lock with something in his hand.

"Can't you clean these up?"

Delgado snorted. "They *are* cleaned up."

Chris looked at her in disbelief.

"I used my own enhancement program on it, but that's the best I could do."

"But I can't see his face!"

"That's not my fault; he's covering up. Look at the angle of his head. He's diddling the lock without looking at it and keeping his face turned away from the camera. Nothing short of a fully integrated AI system would have nailed him, and maybe not even then. He could just as easily have worn a mask—he didn't, but he could have."

She scowled. "Nothing here is worth that ticket, DD."

"Whoa now, let's not be hasty. Here," Delgado handed her an old-fashioned magnifying glass. "Look at what he's using on the lock. What does that look like to you?"

She studied the picture closely with the glass. "It's a key card. I'll kill that damned supervisor. Ryder must have got hold of his master key, or maybe he got a spare key from the office."

"That's what I thought at first, but look at the edges. It's too thick."

She looked again. The card *did* look too thick, and it was wider than the average key card too. She sat back and shook her head. "No, no, no. It can't be."

Delgado shrugged. "I don't like it either, but it sure looks like one to me."

She looked a third time, not wanting to believe it, but the picture quality was just this side of crap. "What did he do, kill a cop?"

"I sure hope not."

Chris stared at the photograph, willing it to give up its secrets, but all she did was strain her eyes. Ryder—if that was really his name—seemed to be using something suspiciously similar to a police ID to diddle the lock. The embedded master key in police badges could open most electronic locks. Of course, any officer doing so had better be ready to answer a lot of questions and justify their actions afterward.

"What about the entry log?"

"Wiped."

"Wiped?"

"Yeah, it's easy. Even you could do it."

She ignored the slight. "Anything else?"

"Just this," Delgado said, and swiveled her chair to face her comp. She typed rapidly, and data flashed onto the screen. "These are the criminal records for the people mentioned on the message disc. I ran a search on the name Ryder for you—all spellings, in case you were wondering—but the only hits I got can't be your boy."

"How did you eliminate them?"

"Two were women, one was black, and the others were dead or still in prison."

"Damn, I was really hoping Baxter had screwed up and missed something obvious."

"Dave is better than that, Chris. You just don't like his brand of charm."

She snorted. *Charm?*

"You want me to print this stuff?"

"Yeah, and email a copy to me and one to Ken."

Delgado did so with a few keystrokes. The printer in the corner hummed and began printing the files. "Anything else, Exalted Leader?"

"Okay, okay, you can cut it out. The ticket is yours, but I have a feeling I'll be sending you more stuff on this case."

"I'll be here, where else would I be?"

The printer shut down, and Chris gathered up the thick pile of paper. She added it to the photographs and took her leave.

She was at her desk reading through everything she had accumulated on the case when Ken and Flint strolled in together chatting like best friends. Chris scowled at this evidence of a deepening relationship between the two, but managed to school her features before either one saw her. She looked at the time pointedly, when Ken went to fetch coffee.

Ken put a cup in front of Chris and handed one to Flint. "What's up?"

"I visited DD earlier this morning." She pulled one of the photographs of Ryder out of the pile in front of her and held it up. "This is the best shot of Ryder—if it really is him, because we don't even know that yet—that we have. DD says she used every trick she knows to clean it up."

Flint frowned. "It's useless. My people can do better, but it won't be as quick."

"I'll get you copies of the discs."

Flint nodded. "I'd like to volunteer my services for the background checks and profiling as well. Our Behavioral Science Unit might come up with something we would

miss.”

She nodded. FBI profilers were legend; she was glad to have their help, and Flint was welcome to the background checks. They were always a pain. Chris was grateful that she didn't have to deal with so much grunt work.

“Good of you,” she said grudgingly. “There's a lot to do, but first I want to get over to Collard Freight.” She slapped a hand on the files. “I want to know who these people are and why Ryder wants to kill them. We'll talk to their employer, workmates, and families. I want to know everything about them before another body turns up.”

“You think one will?” Ken said, putting his coffee down and reaching for the files.

She glanced at Flint and they said together, “Yes.”

Chris drove to Collard Freight's headquarters using her car so that her partners could go over the files on the way. Flint wondered aloud whether Collard had lost any more staff lately, and Chris made a mental note to ask about that. It was possible Ryder had a grudge against the company and had chosen to take his vengeance through its staff.

“This thing with Green Haven bothers me,” Ken said, as they waited for the lights to change. “It's not unusual to use a shifter or two for security, but this many? How could Collard have missed their criminal records? It doesn't make sense.”

Flint nodded. “I agree. Security positions require extensive background checks. They couldn't have missed it.”

“Where does that take us?” Chris said. The lights changed, and she drove on.

Flint shrugged. “Don't know, but something's not right. Either the company is crooked or someone that works there is.”

“It would have to be someone high in management,” Chris mused. “It takes juice to cover something like this.”

Flint nodded. “But why do it at all?”

“That's the question all right.”

Collard rented space for its headquarters on the twenty-third floor of the Hastings Tower in Central City. The elevator deposited them on the correct floor and they trooped to reception to request a meeting with Mr. Hatch. The walls of the lushly carpeted reception area were a light shade of yellow. Framed photographs hung in strategic places to catch the eye and draw visitors to view them. Like the brochure Flint had showed her in Cappy's office, they idealized Collard's operations with photos of happy employees working aboard ships, or operating loaders.

"May I help you?" the receptionist said pleasantly.

Chris flipped open her ID. "Lieutenant Humber, Robbery Homicide Division." She indicated Ken and Flint. "Detective Hart, Agent Flint of the FBI. We're here to see Mr. Hatch."

The receptionist's eyes widened at Flint's introduction. "Oh no... oh, I mean you can't see him."

Chris' eyes narrowed. "We can't?"

"You need to make an appointment."

"This is police business, very urgent. Call him and ask that he see us now."

"You don't understand," the receptionist said, becoming flustered. "He's not here. He's currently touring our facilities on Luna."

"He's on the *Moon*?" she said incredulously.

The receptionist nodded still frowning, but then she brightened. "His personal assistant is here. Should I call him?"

"An assistant is better than nothing," Flint said.

Chris nodded, but she could already feel her planned Q and A session going south. "What's the assistant's name?"

"Mr. Caldewell. Should I call him?"

"Go ahead."

The receptionist did so, and a minute or so later a tall lean man of about thirty years hurried to meet them. He was a handsome man, his milk chocolate complexion shone with the health of long gym sessions, reminding Chris she needed

to set aside some time this week for a workout. Flint's arrival had made her uncomfortably aware that she had let things slide. It was time to dust off her gloves and get back in the ring.

"Agent Flint," Caldewell said hurrying toward them and reaching to shake hands. "What can I do for you?"

Chris scowled as Caldewell chose Flint to address himself to. Flint shook the offered hand and explained that Chris was the lead on the investigation.

"Forgive me, Lieutenant," Caldewell said, shaking hands with each of them to make amends. "How can Collard help you?"

"Your office might be a better place to talk."

"Of course, forgive me again. I'm not used to entertaining the police. Follow me."

Caldewell led them to his office and asked his secretary to provide an extra seat for Ken when he realized he didn't have enough. His secretary, a fresh-faced woman wearing glasses that nicely accentuated her eyes, wheeled a chair into Caldewell's office and nodded when told to hold all calls.

Caldewell sat behind his desk. "There. How can I help you?"

Chris crossed her legs, and interlocked her fingers in her lap. "I'm sure you already know why we're here—the Shifter Slayings?"

"I had hoped to be proven wrong."

"Why do you think Collard has been targeted this way?"

Caldewell's eyes widened a little. "I wasn't aware it *had* been targeted."

"Then you believe that the death of four of your employees is a coincidence."

"Well, when you put it like that..."

She cocked her head. "How else should I put it?"

"Their employment at Collard is hardly the only thing linking them. They were all shifters, so perhaps you should be looking at AML, or at people with similar feelings about

monsters. You might look harder at other shifters—these people live dangerously, Lieutenant. They fight amongst themselves. I doubt I need to remind you of how gang violence has spread in the years since the Urban Revolt.”

“Other avenues are being pursued.”

Caldewell nodded. “I’m sure they are.”

“Were you aware that the four dead men had criminal records?”

“Of course. I would be a poor administrator if I hadn’t known such a basic thing about them. In fact, they were employed because their pasts matched the criteria Collard was looking for at the time.”

“Why employ criminals in such a sensitive area as security?”

“Ex-criminals, Lieutenant. It’s an important distinction.”

“Answer the question, please.”

“I thought I was. You’ve heard I’m sure, the old adage that says: Hire a thief to catch a thief?”

She nodded.

“That’s the reasoning behind hiring ex-criminals for our security department. It has worked out very well. We have always had one or two shifters on staff; they handled night patrols at our facilities. One of our supervisors noticed that losses were much lower when shifters patrolled our sites. Shifters have some advantages over our human employees you see, especially at night.”

“Oh?”

“They can see in the dark like you wouldn’t believe,” Caldewell said enthusiastically. “They’re better than guard dogs at sniffing out intruders, and unlike dogs they can use their radios to call for help. We decided to run an experiment. Armed with the knowledge that shifters were good at this kind of thing, we thought ex-thieves would be even better—a thief to catch a thief.”

She nodded. “I understand the thinking, but what of the temptation inherent in such an arrangement?”

"We did have one or two opportunists," Caldewell admitted reluctantly, "but they were soon weeded out. It's a funny thing, but our own shifters found them out. They seemed to take the betrayal personally, and insisted upon calling the police when we would normally have dismissed the culprits and left it at that." He shrugged. "In any event the experiment was successful, and we hired shifters to take over security."

"What of the people already working for you in that capacity?"

"We moved them into supervisory roles, or we let them go if that's what they wanted..." He frowned. "You don't think one of them is responsible for the murders do you?"

"It's a possibility. Will you give us permission to go through your personnel files? I'm particularly interested in the victims, but any data you have on employees affected by your new security policy will be invaluable."

Caldewell frowned. "I can see how that might help you. I ought to ask Mr. Hatch first, but I'm sure he would agree. The sooner the killer is caught the better for all of us."

"Exactly."

"I'll have Jody—that's my secretary—escort you over to personnel. You'll be given full cooperation."

Chris stood. "Thank you."

Caldewell led them out of his office, and gave his secretary her instructions.

"If you'll follow me please," Jody said.

Chris looked back and found Caldewell still watching them. Flint had noticed too, and was frowning thoughtfully. Chris allowed Jody to pull ahead before asking what was on her mind.

"What's wrong?"

Flint gently shook her head. "I'm not sure anything is, but I think Caldewell was stringing us along. He's too eager to please."

"It made a nice change I thought."

Flint snorted. "I don't trust him, or Collard. There's something wrong here, I'm sure of it."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. It's just a feeling, but there's something not right. You're planning to interview the people at Collard's warehouse and distribution site, correct?"

"That's the plan."

"I want to sit in on the interviews."

She shrugged. "I have no problem with that, as long as you inform me the moment you have something solid on Collard. I don't like being left in the dark."

"I can do that."

A humanoid robot managed Collard's personnel department. The upper body of the android was that of a well-dressed woman in her mid twenties—very life-like—but when Chris checked, she found that below the waist it was part of the desk and only seemed to be sitting behind it. Jody gave the thing its instructions and left.

The android smiled. "You have full access to my files, Lieutenant. How may I be of service?"

Its voice sounded completely human, and the smile looked natural, but its eyes were empty. Soulless. Its empty-eyed stare made a chill run up her spine. It was like having a corpse smile at her. She forced herself to look away from it, and the uneasy feeling passed.

"These things give me the willies. Deal with it, would you, Ken?"

Ken nodded. "We need access to the personnel files of the following employees: Daniel Bryce, Steven Derrico, Andrew Fain, and Vincent Fairman."

"Clarify: hard copy or electronic download?"

"Hard copy—discs only, please."

"Thank you. I am transferring the relevant documents to disc now. Do you require anything else?"

"Yes please. We require information on all non-human employees currently employed by Collard at its facilities in

Los Angeles, and details of human employees they replaced. Copy to discs again, please.”

“Thank you. Transfer is in progress.”

Chris shook her head. “Why do we say please to machines, and program them to say thank you?”

Flint shrugged. “Because we’re human, and being courteous is polite.”

“But they’re not even people.”

“They’re programmed *by* people to talk *to* people.”

“I suppose so. I don’t have a problem with robots that look like robots, only ones that try to be human.”

“Androids you mean. Do they make you that uncomfortable?”

She shrugged self-consciously. “Yeah they do. Maybe it’s because I’d never met one until I came to live in the city.”

Flint raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Where did you grow up, Alaska?”

“Not even close. I grew up on a farm in Orange County. My family has owned and worked it for generations, but I wanted out. I couldn’t wait to go to college and leave the stink of horses behind.”

“I love horses,” Flint protested.

“You wouldn’t say that if you had spent years mucking out their stalls. Ranch farming is my Dad’s life, my Mum’s too, but it’s not mine.”

“I heard your father is something of a celebrity.”

Why was Flint interested in her father? Chris glanced at Ken, but he was busy trying to look invisible. “What’s your point?”

“No point, Lieutenant. I was just wondering what is was like growing up with a witch for a father—”

“It was flaming embarrassing mostly.”

“—and whether you had inherited his gift.”

That stumped her for a moment. She had always resisted learning anything at all about magic from her father. When she was little, she couldn’t help noticing strange people visiting

her Dad at all hours. She had thought it was kind of neat that he had superpowers, but when she was old enough to understand that being a witch's daughter made her a freak in other people's eyes, she had refused to have anything to do with magic. It hadn't saved her from being taunted at school, but she had found ways to deal with that—she became a master of dirty fighting.

"Magic isn't one of my talents, Agent Flint."

"That isn't what I asked."

"His *gift* seems to have passed me by. I have never cast a spell, and I wouldn't if I could. Is that plain enough for you?"

Flint backed-off. "No harm. There's no need to become defensive about it. I was only asking."

She frowned. Why did Flint want to know if she practiced magic? Maybe it was just idle curiosity, but somehow she didn't think so.

When the discs were complete, Ken gathered them up and they left the building. Rather than head back to Central with their booty, they decided to check out Collard's warehouse and distribution centre. All the victims had worked there; Chris wanted to see the site for herself. Flint thought something was iffy at Collard, and she didn't seem the kind to jump at shadows. It reinforced Chris' own wish to meet those who had worked alongside the victims.

\* \* \*

## Tattooed Lady

“I can’t believe they’re actually going to do it,” Mark said at the breakfast table that morning.

“Hmmm?”

“Amend the Constitution. It says here that the President’s amendments include removing the paranormal, supernatural, and magical classifications from the Bill of Rights. He wants to lump them all under a new one—preternatural—and give them the same rights as us. It’s unbelievable! The Bill of Rights has stood for... well, *forever*. He’ll start talking about repealing them *next*. What is the man thinking of? It was a sad day when Mitchell stepped into the White House.”

“Uh huh,” Chris said vaguely, frowning at the report before her.

She had printed relevant portions of Baxter’s files to study in her off time. Strictly speaking she shouldn’t have brought them home, but what the hell—she needed to get a handle on this case before another body turned up.

She took a bite of her toast and turned the page.

Baxter was thorough; she would give him that. Before conducting her own interviews, she had read the transcripts of his, but she learned nothing new. She had hoped for more.

"Chris?"

"What?"

"I said it was a sad day when Mitchell stepped into the White House."

"But you voted for him."

Mark's face heated in embarrassment. "Well yeah, but I didn't know he was going to do this. If this goes through Congress, everything under the sun will have the right to vote. Good goddess, Chris, we could have a vamp in the White House!"

She snorted. "Never happen."

"It could though; by law it could."

"Who the hell would vote a vamp into office? Be serious."

"That's not the point, it was just an example. I am being serious, Chris. If the amendments go through everything will change. You think you have problems now, wait until you have to protect the rights of vamps to feed on their victims."

She just shook her head and ate her breakfast. If the government gave vamps the vote, she would defend their right to do so, even if it meant escorting the buggers to the polling station personally. She might not like doing it, but she would see it done. She enforced the laws of State and Republic; she did not make them. She had no interest in politics.

She glanced at the time and gulped her coffee. "I've got to go," she said, gathering up her papers and rising to her feet.

Mark reached out and pulled her into his lap for a quick cuddle. "I love you, Lieutenant."

"Hmmm," she sighed in pleasure as his hands wandered under her sweater. It might have become more interesting but she had work. "I've gotta go."

Mark sighed and kissed her cheek. "I know. Be careful out there. This," he flicked a finger against her weapon where it hung from her shoulder harness, "doesn't make you safe. *This* is your greatest weapon," he tapped her temple gently.

He was right.

"I'm always careful," she said disentangling herself from his embrace. She grabbed his head and kissed him. "There's something on account."

He made a grab for her when she let him go, but she danced back out of reach.

"Now you won't be able to think of anything but me all day!" she said as she pulled on her jacket and grabbed her keys from the counter beside the sink. "Love you."

She stepped out the door.

An accident that needed heavy lift equipment to clear closed the highway and delayed her drive to work. Even in this time of automated vehicles and AI driven traffic control, accidents happened. She watched the crane circling overhead, waiting for its ground crew to signal their readiness. As soon as the last ambulance lifted off, the ground crew contacted the crane, and it swept in to hover over the wrecked vehicles. Its huge tilt jet engines screamed to arrest its speed, and then settled into a steady howl as the crane lowered its main sling.

Chris turned up the music and flicked on the autopilot. She could use the delay to continue her reading. Fairman's message disc had proven to be her only real lead. Ironical really. All the data that Baxter had collected on the shifter slayings led nowhere but in a circle. Fairman's murder—apparently unconnected at first glance—was her best chance to solve the case. Despite DD's help in running a rigorous comp search, followed by Chris' interviews with the victims' friends, relatives, and work colleagues, she had failed to find Tony. The woman mentioned on the message disc, Sandy Hodges, had failed to appear for work the day of Vincent's murder, and none of her friends knew her whereabouts.

Tony had mentioned three men: Danny, Marty, and Jay. Baxter had positively identified Daniel Bryce as the first victim. Marty and Jay had thus far failed to turn up. The other two victims, Steven Derrico and Andrew Fain had worked with Bryce and Fairman at Collard Freight, just as Baxter had

maintained. Everything appeared aboveboard, but it hadn't convinced Flint. She still thought Hatch and his company were a front of some kind. It was possible, so Chris hadn't objected to Flint using her contacts to dig into its business.

Nothing had yet come of it. Flint was still hopeful.

Once passed the crash site, Chris' car picked up speed until the tires were humming over the pavement. She would be at her desk in no time. She quickly reassembled her papers into the folder, and then turned off the autopilot. Driving manually took her mind off work for a while.

Mark had brought up the wedding again last night. He wanted to set the date for eight weeks this coming Sunday, but she wasn't sure. She wanted to marry him, she was certain of that, but he wanted the works—white wedding, bridesmaids, huge cake—the real deal. Ten year marriage contracts with options for renewal were pretty much standard, but Mark wouldn't hear of it. He was so retro in his thinking sometimes, just like his parents.

She would have been happier signing a marriage contract in the presence of a lawyer and AI like a normal person. It would certainly be easier and more comfortable, but Mark wouldn't even talk about it. As far as he was concerned, the marriage wouldn't be real without a priest saying the words with dozens of friends and family as witnesses. At least a big old wedding would make his parents happy. They were a little uncomfortable with their boy marrying a cop in the first place, let alone having him do it by signing a simple contract.

She had made the mistake of telling them about her work once. Thank the goddess she hadn't related to them one of her more harrowing cases. Instead, she had chosen to tell them about her time in uniform and her special kids. They had listened in uncomprehending silence as she told them how she had befriended some of the children running around Monster Central.

Mark's parents couldn't conceive of children running in packs like animals, and hadn't believed her when she explained

how they survived. They couldn't imagine the violence she saw in her life. It had no place in theirs, and she was thankful for that. It still amazed her that there were people living in the city who had never witnessed a violent act. The Grinelys had been married almost their entire adult lives and were the perfect couple. Sometimes, when it got bad and she wondered what the hell she was doing, she would imagine them safe at home laughing together. It got her through.

Chris parked her car outside Central and headed in, but before she got halfway up the steps to the main doors, someone hailed her.

"Chrissy!"

Only one person ever called her that. Andrew Norris—called J-bone by his friends—a gang name he had never explained. He was one of her weasels and usually more circumspect. Chris trotted back down the steps and met him at the corner where he loitered.

"What the hell are you doing here, J-bone?" she hissed and shoved him around the corner before someone saw them together. "You know better than this. You'll be no good to me if we're seen together." She hurried him toward a place she knew. "You pawned your link again didn't you? *Didn't you?* I told you to keep it on you!"

He was supposed to pass her information using his link, not hang around Central looking for her. She supplied second-hand links to all of her kids to prevent this kind of situation. Ken called her kids *her little waifs*, or sometimes *her weasel brigade*, but even he didn't know the whole of it. Gangs were common enough that no one bothered to learn who they all were. Well she had bothered, and now had dozens of them living throughout the area like extra pairs of eyes. It only cost her a link and a few dollars now and then... and besides, they needed someone willing to listen to their troubles. She had a special relationship with her kids, one not normally shared between a cop and her informants. She didn't want it widely known how much she cared for them, and she daren't let

Cappy find out about some of the things she had done in the past to protect them. Not if she wanted to continue carrying a badge.

"I'll get you another one," she said, pushing him into the doorway of the coffee shop.

J-bone waved that away. "I'll get it back after we're done here. I just needed a little extra cash yesterday. You know what I'm saying?"

"I know what you're saying all right. I thought you were clean."

"I am!" he said a little too fast for Chris to believe him. "Look, don't sweat it. I done good. I got something real good for ya. Swear."

She pushed him inside and sat him down at a corner table. When a waitress came by, she ordered two coffees and a doughnut for J-bone. His eyes lit up like a kid. It was so pathetically easy to keep him happy.

"Give."

"Not so fast. Money first and then we talk. I need a hundred."

"A hundred!" she hissed in outrage. "Since when have your prices doubled?"

"Since shifters started croaking left and right, and since I know you're looking for a certain chick named Sandy."

Chris' eyes narrowed. "Describe her."

J-bone grinned. "I thought you trusted me..." he broke off as the waitress returned with their order. He took a big bite of his doughnut. "It's good!"

"Glad you like it. Describe Sandy or no hundred."

"About my height, brown eyes, and dark hair, but she usually wears a blonde wig. She's half Mexican or something—has a real nice tan all over. She has a neat tattoo on her right thigh."

It sounded like her, though Chris hadn't known about the tattoo. There were probably lots of women matching the description, but she couldn't take the chance of this woman

being the one and passing up the opportunity. She pulled out her Dad's old wallet, and plucked a pair of fifties from her stash. She always kept some cash on her for just this kind of thing; she made a note to put a voucher on Cappy's desk to replace it.

She slid the money across the table.

J-bone made the notes disappear. "I was fooling around with the guys last night. You know how it goes, one of us follows someone, and another bumps into him—"

"Don't tell me this; I don't want to hear this!" she said trying to shut her ears to his crime. If he told her, she would have to take him in. "Get to the part where you know where Sandy is."

"I'm getting to it. Anyway, we was fooling around and having a few laughs, when I heard this screaming. Nothing unusual about it, there's always something going down, but we decided to have ourselves a look. What do you think we saw?"

"Sandy?"

"Yeah. There was this dirty great big dog chewing on a guy on the ground, and Sandy standing in the corner of the alley screaming her head off. She was almost climbing the walls trying to get away. I charged the thing and smacked it a good one with this bat I had... I mean that I found. It ran off."

She tried not to look skeptical. J-bone wasn't hero. If the other guy carried a knife, he wanted a tank before he would get himself involved.

"Sandy was real grateful, I mean *real* grateful," he said with a leer. "She told me all sorts of stuff afterwards. That's how I knew you would pay."

"What about the guy?"

"Dead," he said with a disinterested shrug. "Probably still there."

"I need a location for the alley, and I need Sandy in my hands right now," she said intently.

"No problem. I left her sleeping at my place."

"She better still be there."

"She will be. I doped her up pretty good. She ain't used to it. Probably be out for a couple of hours yet."

"Good."

Chris made certain she had J-bone's current address, and made him draw a map to the alley. With plenty of prompting from her, he produced a half decent map. She added one or two landmarks—clubs and bars they both knew, to make sure.

"Here? You're certain?"

J-bone pointed to the map. "This here is Lost Souls, and this Jumpin' Jaks. Frankie's Bar and Grill on the corner of Main and Sixth is here. You can't miss."

She folded the napkin. "Okay. Don't go back to your place until it's over. As far as you're concerned, we raided the apartment below yours. Okay?"

"Good doing business with you, Chrissy." He rummaged in his pocket and produced a metal key. "You'll need this. Leave it in the door when you go, I ain't got nothing worth stealing. I only locked it to keep the silly bitch in there for you."

Chris took the key and left him eating another doughnut.

Chris knocked once and entered the office to find her captain sitting behind his desk reading a report on his comp. "Sorry to disturb you, Cappy, but I need a favor."

Cappy sighed and looked at her glumly. "Why does everyone that comes in here say that?"

"Maybe they think of you as a father figure?"

He snorted and waved her into a seat. "What do you need?"

"I've found Sandy Hodges... maybe," she said hedging. "I've got an address where she's supposed to be, but I need a warrant and I need it fast. I don't want her disappearing on me."

Cappy nodded and started making the call to the Assistant District Attorney. Chris gave him the address of the apartment and waited for the warrant to be authorized. Five minutes later, the hard copy printer chattered, and she stood to receive what she needed. She checked the details including the date and signature. All was in order.

“Thanks, Cappy.”

He nodded and turned back to his reports.

Chris tucked the warrant in her pocket and left his office. She found Ken and Agent Flint chatting like old friends at his desk. Flint had ditched her power suit on her second day in favor of more rugged working clothes—black jeans, black sneakers, and red polo-neck sweater. For weapons, Flint favored a double shoulder rig, and carried a pair of Glock needlers. She wore a leather jacket that could have come from the same rack that Chris’ came from. It hadn’t though. Flint’s was real leather.

Chris approved of Flint’s choice of working clothes, but not her choice of weapon. Needlers were exclusively military hardware, used primarily off world where weapons with more stopping power could rupture a dome or breach a ship’s hull. They were non-standard even for the Feds. For someone like Flint, who preferred two weapons, Chris would have expected her to carry a police issue stunner like all uniformed officers carried, partnered with a federal issue K6 Remington. Chris used a K6, but carried a Sharpe’s Defender II at the small of her back as a backup. Defenders had a short range, but they packed a hell of a punch. If she ever needed to use it, she would be in trouble in more ways than one. They were illegal as hell.

“We have a lead,” she said quickly to prevent questions. “And we have to split up. Ken, I want you to check out this alley,” she handed him J-bone’s napkin and pointed out the right spot. “Ask Cappy to let you have Jimmy for a couple of hours. He’ll go for it.”

“And what will you be doing?”

"Agent Flint and I will be picking up a certain doped up young lady."

Flint's ears figuratively pricked. "You found Sandy. How?"

"You're not the only one with contacts. Let's move."

They moved.

Chris drove. Flint didn't object—they'd had it out the first day. Flint was on her turf and in her vehicle, so she drove. Simple. She maneuvered the car through traffic as if piloting a missile. Flint drew a sharp breath a couple of times, and Chris grinned.

"Are you trying to kill me or yourself?"

Chris shrugged. "When I try to kill you, you'll know."

"It's obvious you have a problem with me, but do you even know why?"

"I don't like people sticking their noses in my business."

"That's all this is... professional rivalry?"

"That's all."

Flint frowned. "You don't think it has more to do with Ken and how he sees me?"

Her knuckles whitened on the wheel. "Don't flatter yourself. Ken doesn't need anyone to tell him how to run his life. It will take more than a bitch in heat to turn his head."

Flint's eyes widened and she would have retorted, but something else must have occurred to her because she calmed abruptly. "That's what you think of me... a bitch in heat? You don't think that Ken might see something different?"

Chris slapped the autopilot on and turned to face her unwanted partner. "Look, I really don't care what he sees. I know what I see: someone with her own agenda and a rather large opinion of herself, messing with my partner, my case, and my *fucking* life! I don't need you and I don't want you, but I'm stuck with you until I close this case. I guess I'll have to deal with it."

"That's plain enough. If you don't want me with you, why am I here?"

“You’re here so I can keep an eye on you. I could have sent you off with Jimmy to collect our latest victim, but Ken is my partner not Jimmy. This case is as much his as mine.”

“And you want to keep him away from me.”

Chris smiled. “That too.”

J-bone lived in a dilapidated dump dating back to before the Urban Revolt. If space hadn’t been at such a premium and its owners so tight fisted, they would have torn it down and replaced it with something a little more livable. It didn’t have security at the front doors, and it certainly didn’t have its own AI... it barely had running water. J-bone’s apartment did have the basics to sustain life—a lockable door, four walls, and the standard communications and entertainment centre, but that was about it.

They made their way up the stairs to J-bone’s apartment, neither of them trusting the decrepit elevator. Chris pulled her weapon, as did Flint who stood to the right side of the door out of harm’s way. Chris, to the left with her back pressed to the wall, reached to try the door. Locked. Her master key wouldn’t get her in here. The locks were ancient mechanical anachronisms. Flint raised an eyebrow when Chris produced the metal key J-bone gave her and unlocked the door.

“I go in, you back me.”

“Okay,” Flint said with a nod.

Chris pushed the door open and eased inside with her gun leading the way. The room was empty. She covered a door to the right as Flint slid past her keeping her back against the wall. Flint entered the room while Chris covered her.

“Clear,” Flint said.

Chris pivoted around to the left. She pushed open the next door and found the bathroom. Sandy was kneeling on the floor in her underwear with her head hanging over the toilet bowl dry heaving.

“Police. Turn toward me slowly and show me those hands.”

“I feel like shit,” Sandy said, her voice echoing from the

toilet bowl. "What the hell did I do last night, and who did I do it with?"

Flint peered around the doorjamb. "Not much is she?"

She wasn't. For someone that the entire city's police department wanted to find, Sandy looked remarkably ordinary. Whatever J-bone had used on her had made her sick, but even without that she wasn't much to look at. From J-bone's enthusiastic appraisal, Chris had expected more. Black tangled hair was plastered to Sandy's sweaty brow, and the tan he spoke of could have come out of a bottle for all Chris knew.

"Nice tattoo," Flint said.

Chris ignored that. She wasn't interested in butterflies. She holstered her gun and pulled Sandy to her feet where she swayed and blinked in confusion.

"Are you Sandy Hodges?"

"I'm gonna puke."

Chris stepped back. "Not on me. Are you Sandy Hodges?"

"Last time I looked I was," Sandy said clutching her head. "I need a Doctor."

"What you need is to put some clothes on and come with me."

She frog-marched Sandy into the bedroom, and deposited her on the bed. The room stank of stale sex and smelly socks. She would be sure to tell J-bone when she saw him. She found Sandy's clothes tossed around the room. Flint leaned against the wall looking faintly disgusted while Chris dressed Sandy as if dressing a child. By the time she was done, Sandy had realized where she was and what had happened.

She wasn't happy.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Police," Chris said. "You're wanted in connection with four murders."

"I ain't done nothing."

She snorted. "As if you could."

“Bitch.”

“That would be me,” Flint said raising her hand briefly. “Know anyone by the name of Tony by any chance?”

Sandy’s face crumpled. “Oh Lady... he’s dead! Tony’s dead!” she wailed, and burst into tears.

“Oh for crying out loud.” Chris aimed a glare at Flint. “Sandy... *Sandy!*”

“What?” Sandy asked, still sniffing.

“I’m taking you in. You’re not under arrest unless you want to be, but you *are* coming with me to answer some questions.”

She pulled the crying woman to her feet and walked her out of the room.

A media circus confronted them when they stepped onto the street. How in the nine hells had they found out about so fast? No one but Ken and Flint knew they were coming here. Keeping a firm hold on Sandy’s left arm while Flint took her right, they marched the unresisting woman down the steps toward the car.

“Lieutenant Humber!” Ed Davis yelled. “Our viewers want to know how you intend to find the perpetrator of five shifter murders. They have a right to know how you will protect them.”

“No they don’t,” she growled still advancing and making him back up. “Now get out of my face before I arrest you for obstruction.”

Davis ignored the threat and thrust a microphone at Sandy. “Miss Hodges, would you like to say a few words?”

“I ain’t done nothing,” Sandy said sullenly.

“Ah yes...” Davis’ smile faltered for an instant. “Perhaps you would care to comment on these grisly slayings of the innocent members of our community?”

“No one is innocent in this city.”

“Well said,” Chris murmured under her breath and opened the passenger door. “In, and mind your head.”

“Five dead, Lieutenant, and you’re no closer to the one

responsible than you were on day one.”

Chris’ eyes narrowed. Did Channel 5 have a mole in the Department? Someone had told them where she would be. Davis had known to find her here when no one but Ken and Flint knew that, and he knew about Tony—the fifth victim.

Chris climbed into the car. “The investigation is proceeding satisfactorily. With Miss Hodges’ help, an arrest is just a matter of time.” She slammed the door barely missing Ed’s fingers as he hastily withdrew his microphone.

“Nice ambiguous statement,” Flint said dryly.

“Thanks,” she said with a genuine smile.

They were both smiling as they left the media behind.

A couple of hours later they were no longer smiling. Chris’ head pounded and her shoulders felt knotted with tension. Even Flint looked a little tight around the eyes. Sandy had propped her elbows on the table and was nursing her third cup of coffee. She took a sip and then a drag on the nicstick, before adding to the blue haze in the room through her nose.

Chris waved smoke away from her face. “Let’s be clear. You’re saying the man you were with in the alley, Tony Dietz, was killed by a guy with a bat.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“And you’re going to stick with that?”

“Why shouldn’t I when it’s the truth?”

Chris climbed to her feet and paced away the ache in her backside. She dialed the air conditioning up to high in an effort to suck some of the smoke out of the room. The haze began to clear as the temperature plummeted. Flint hugged her arms and began to shiver. Chris frowned, unsure why that bothered her, but shrugged it away as unimportant. When the air cleared, she reset the thermostat and turned back to Sandy.

“I’ll tell you why: we are not stupid. No matter what you hear on the news I can assure you of that. Tony’s throat was torn out—”

Sandy flinched.

“—and now he’s dead. Just like Daniel Bryce, Steven Derrico, Andrew Fain, and Vincent Fairman. Do I have to tell you what each of these men had in common? They all knew *you!*”

Sandy gaped in surprise.

Chris hadn’t tried this approach before and smiled grimly at the shock on Sandy’s face. Sandy’s hands shook as she reached for the pack of nicsticks to light another. Chris flew across the room in two strides. Her hand flashed and slammed down on the pack. She shook her head slowly and withdrew the smokes.

“I’ve tried to be nice and you give me nothing but lies. No more privileges, no more friendly questions, Miss Hodges. You will tell me what you know of a man named Ryder, and you will be really truthful, or I’m going to make it my personal mission in life to make yours pure *hell!*”

Sandy flinched and began to snifle.

*Craaaack!*

Chris’ hand stung from slapping the table. “That won’t work; we’re all girls together here. Try the tears on the guys, not me.”

“Bitch,” Sandy hissed.

“You said that before. It’s time you told me something new. Who is Ryder, how do you know him? Why did he attack Tony Dietz and not you? Where can I find him?”

“I don’t know him very well... *I swear I don’t!*” Sandy said as Chris’ face darkened. “He came sniffing around the office a couple of months ago asking questions. He was nice to me. He took me out for coffee lunchtimes and we chatted.”

“And you went with him just like that?”

“Well... yeah.” Sandy looked down, embarrassed to admit it, but then her face darkened with anger. “I didn’t know he was a killer! He’s good looking and takes care of himself. He’s different to the guys I usually hang with.”

“Different how?”

"I don't know... it was like he knew what I was thinking. Yeah, like he knew exactly what to say and do, to make me happy. I liked him. He was kind to me."

Flint glided forward silently. "But something happened, something that warned you off."

"Yeah," Sandy said miserably. "I didn't even notice at first, but he was interested in my work. I was flattered. I'm only a shipping clerk for the Lady's sake, but he made it seem important. I told him stuff."

"Stuff?" she asked, glancing at Flint. "What kind of stuff?"

"Stuff I shouldn't have. He said he was a writer and I believed him. Someone like him, he should be something like that, you know? I showed him a manifest he asked to see, but Tony found out. Tony is my friend... *was* my friend. He told me Ryder wanted to hurt the company and not to see him no more. I didn't want to lose my job, so I did what he wanted. Tony said he would take care of Ryder with some of his boys."

"Tony handled security for Hatch?"

"What else would a shifter be good at?"

Flint's eyes narrowed. "You think Tony went after Ryder to hurt him... maybe as a warning?"

Sandy nodded miserably.

Chris frowned thoughtfully. Tony Dietz worked for Hatch as his enforcer, and the other dead shifters were his so-called security team. The term *bang and burn* team was *so* offensive wasn't it? Ryder had been sniffing after something, but Dietz and his boys had nailed him. Why they hadn't killed him puzzled her, but she couldn't see how it mattered now. Ryder had got himself hurt and wanted revenge. He was taking the shifters on one by one. Only Marty and Jay still lived. She wasn't certain about Marty. From the recording found at Vincent's apartment, she tended to doubt it. So then, Jay would be the next victim. According to Collard's files, Jason Kirkwood still lived with his parents, something that had

turned out to be false.

Sandy was their first real break on the case. They knew Ryder's name—if it wasn't an alias of course, but more importantly, they knew what he looked like from Sandy's description of him. Armed with that data, they had a real chance of finding him before he reached his next victim. She was determined to get to Jay first.

"Right, one last time from the beginning for the record," she said nodding to Flint to insert a fresh disc in the table consol.

She led Sandy through her statement, and then had her sign and date each disc. Flint sealed them in their cases—her thumbprint activated the electronic seals.

Sandy's eyes followed the discs as Flint handed them to Chris. "What happens to me now?"

Chris motioned for Sandy to stand. "Protective custody until this is over. You'll be safe."

Sandy stood and they escorted her out.

\* \* \*

## **Target Sighted**

Ben Kirkwood was being a pain in the arse. At their previous meeting, Chris had questioned him on the whereabouts of his son and received, if not useful information, at least cooperation. This time however, he was less than eager to speak with her.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Lieutenant,” Kirkwood said, busily reorganizing one of the shelves in his store. The business was family owned with only one employee in addition to himself. His brother manned the register while Ben restocked the shelves. “Like I told you before, Jason and I don’t talk as much as we used to. We lost touch after he moved out. He’s his own man now.” Kirkwood’s eyes slid briefly to Flint’s, and then fearfully away.

Chris frowned at the byplay, not understanding it.

Ken took up the slack. “The last time we spoke you mentioned some of Jay’s friends. Have you heard from any of them since then?”

Kirkwood’s eyes flickered. “No, nothing from them.”

He was lying. She didn’t know what about exactly, but he was. She was a good judge of expression and body language; it came in handy during interrogation. Ben Kirkwood was

afraid, not of them specifically, but of their questions. He was reacting to Flint very oddly indeed. Every time he answered a question, his eyes would seek hers as if looking for approval. Did he know her?

She shook off her preoccupation to concentrate on business. "Perhaps you've heard from Marty?" she said, fishing for something useful.

"Marty Preston? No, can't say I have. Of course with Jason gone, he doesn't come around as much as he used to. Him and that girl of his were always dropping in at one time or another, but not since Jay... left."

"The girl would have been Sandy Hodges?"

"Sandy? No, I don't think that was her name. It was Becky or Rebecca something." Kirkwood straightened after restocking a lower shelf. "Becky Cain or Caines... no that's not... *Cairns!* Rebecca Cairns was her name. She works in one of the clubs."

"Would that be Area 51 by any chance?" Ken asked, glancing at Chris to see if she had caught the significance.

She nodded thinking about the stamp on Fairman's hand.

Kirkwood grabbed cans from the box at his feet and continued loading the shelves. "I don't recall her ever telling me its name, but it might have been. She might have told me, but I wouldn't have been interested enough to remember it. Nice girl though. Why would someone like her want to hang around a monster club like Area 51?" He shook his head in puzzlement.

A customer wandered up to them and interrupted the questioning. "Ben, sorry to interrupt, but I can't find the maple syrup."

"Its on the bottom shelf next to the... hang on, it will be quicker if I show you." He turned to Chris. "Won't be a minute."

"Take your time," she said sourly. After all, they were only trying to catch the killer of five people here. Kirkwood took her words at face value and left with his customer trailing him.

She turned to Flint. "What's with you and Kirkwood?"

Flint tried to look puzzled. "I don't know what you mean, Lieutenant."

"I mean the way he looks at you before answering questions. It's as if he's looking for permission or something. What gives?"

"You're imagining things."

"She's right," Ken said. "Every time we asked him something he looked at you before answering. He's acting like you're his boss or something."

That was it exactly. Kirkwood acted as if Flint would punish him for saying the wrong thing.

"Maybe he's reacting to my innate authority."

Chris snorted.

Kirkwood rejoined them after escorting his customer to the checkout. "If there's nothing further, Lieutenant, I have work."

She gritted her teeth to stop herself from snapping at him. "We all have our work to do, Mr. Kirkwood. You're making mine harder. I need to find Jason before the killer does. If you know where he is, you'd do well to tell me now."

"But I don't *know* where he is."

"We have reason to believe your son may be in danger. Doesn't that mean anything to you? Have you any idea, *any at all*, where he would go if he felt threatened?"

Kirkwood glanced at Flint again, pleading for reassurance. "None at all. Jay stopped confiding in me a long time ago. I've helped you all I can, Lieutenant. Now, if you don't mind I've got to get these shelves stocked."

What in the nine hells was wrong with this guy? She had met some callous people in her time, but few of them had frustrated her as much as Ben Kirkwood had managed to do. Didn't he care about his son? Didn't he care that a killer like Ryder was after him? She shook her head and sighed wearily. She would have liked to take him in for a nice little sweating session, but she doubted anything would come of it.

“Call us if you hear from your son, Mr. Kirkwood. It really is in his best interests.”

Kirkwood nodded not looking up from his work.

Her lips thinned at his lack of interest. She led her partners outside.

“He’s holding back,” Ken said opening the car door.

“Oh yeah, he knows something all right,” Flint agreed, climbing into the back. “You think he knows where Jason is?”

Chris started the car and pulled into traffic. “Could be, but let’s concentrate on Jason’s pals for a minute. If Marty is alive, what are the odds he’s with his girlfriend?”

“Pretty good I’d say,” Flint said thoughtfully. “Area 51 then?”

She nodded. “Area 51 it is.”

Area 51 was closed to the public at this time of day, but that proved no hindrance. Her badge could have unlocked the doors with its embedded master key, but that was unnecessary and somewhat confrontational. She did confrontation well, but only when called for; anything else would dilute the effect when she really needed it. A quick word with a harried employee sweeping the forecourt outside the ticketing booths was enough to see her and both her partners inside.

Chris made her way into the club avoiding more Area 51 employees wielding brooms as she did so. Broken glass and trash littered the dance floor. Above her head hung a bewildering array of lights, holovid screens, and other electronic mood enhancement devices. Some of them looked vaguely illegal, but she knew that if she checked they would all scrape past a public health and safety inspection. One or two of the devices *would* be illegal out of state. She knew that for a fact.

“So this is a monster club,” Flint said, looking around in disapproval at the mess. “I’m not impressed.”

“You would be if you’d been here last night, dear lady.”

They turned to find a stocky man coming to meet them. Chris judged him with a single look: roughly one-seventy-five centimeters tall, one-eighty pounds, forty-five years of age—maybe a little older—his hair was grey-streaked but mainly dark. He approached with a smile on his face and was already reaching to shake hands. He was wearing his bright green shirt untucked over maroon pants; garish yes, but not out of place considering the surroundings.

“Craig Greenwood, manager of Area 51, at your service,” he said, shaking each of their hands. “How can I be of service to the city’s finest?”

Chris raised an eyebrow. He had a very pronounced European accent. “You have an employee by the name of Rebecca Cairns, Mr. Greenwood—”

“Craig, please.”

“We need a word with her, Craig.”

“I believe she will be performing tonight. Let me check. If you will follow me to my office?” Greenwood didn’t wait to see if they would or not. “Rebecca is one of our more popular acts. I hope there’s not a problem.”

“Her name came up in the course of an ongoing investigation. I’m not at liberty to discuss details.”

“Of course, of course, forgive my prying. Curiosity has long been a vice of mine.”

Greenwood showed them into his office and offered to have a third seat brought in, but they declined to sit. They watched as he accessed his employee roster on his comp. He frowned at something he found and used his link to call someone.

“Edward? It’s Craig... I’m not calling about that... yes, that’s fine. Listen, I have the police here with me asking to see Rebecca... no the other one. Yes, the one in the cat suit. Right. It seems she missed her last act. Why wasn’t I... oh, I see. No that’s fine. If she arranged it ahead of time with you... no, but I would like to be informed about these things.” He sighed. “I’m not *saying* that! Of course you’re still stage manager... *and*

backstage manager.” He hit the mute button and rolled his eyes at Chris. “Edward is a little temperamental, but he’s too good to let go.” He hit the mute button again. “I’ve got to go Edward... *Edward, I’ve got to go!* I have every confidence in your choice. Bye.” He dropped his link back into his jacket pocket. “It seems that Rebecca arranged for some time off to take care of a personal matter. All above board you understand. She even arranged for a temporary replacement for her act. Marvelous girl; very reliable.”

Chris grimaced. Everything had conspired against them on this case. Just for once she would like to get a lead and have it be where it was supposed to be.

“Have you an address for Rebecca?”

“I’m sure I do, but I’m not sure I should give it to you.”

“This is a police matter, a murder investigation.”

Greenwood’s eyes brightened with interest and he leaned forward eagerly to hear more. “A murder investigation? My, my, how interesting. I suppose if I don’t give it to you you’ll just get a warrant.”

“You’ve got that right,” Ken put in.

“Well then, in the interests of friendly relations with the police of our fair city, I shall find the address for you. A moment.” Greenwood turned back to his comp. A few keystrokes and the hardcopy printer chattered. “There you are. May I help you with anything else?”

Chris shook her head and slipped the paper into her pocket.

“This girl filling in for Rebecca,” Flint said. “Is she on the premises?”

“I believe she is. I’m sure I saw her backstage earlier, why?”

“I’d like to ask her a few questions.”

“Nothing easier, I can have her come here.” Greenwood reached for his link again.

“That won’t be necessary. I’m sure you have a lot of work to catch up on. If you point us in the right direction I’m sure

we'll be fine."

"I can do that. Go out of the office and back to where we first met. To the right of the stage you'll find a door. Go through to backstage, turn left and you'll see all the dressing rooms. Sharon Tolliday is who you're looking for. Just ask someone and they'll steer you right."

"Thank you."

Before they left, Chris had to ask one other thing. "You're accent... it's fake, right?"

Greenwood chuckled. "Indeed not. I spent most of my childhood in England. My mother went back to live there after a messy divorce and took me with her."

She nodded. "You sound like that actor, Charles Kelly."

Greenwood winced. "Please. Kelly is a poser—a complete fraud I assure you."

"Really?"

"It is quite obvious to those of us who have lived within the Empire for any real length of time."

Another illusion shot down in flames. She thanked Greenwood for his help and left his office with Flint and Ken on her heels. Chris couldn't help wondering what Greenwood's story was. How had he ended up running a monster club like Area 51?

"You think this Tolliday girl knows something?" Ken asked Flint as they retraced their steps.

Flint shrugged. "Maybe not, but while we're here we can at least ask what reason Rebecca gave for her absence. It might prove useful."

Chris had guessed Flint's reasoning as soon as she spoke up in the office; she remained silent as they entered backstage, letting Flint lead. As Greenwood said, they found themselves in an area with many doors leading to dressing areas and storerooms.

"We're looking for Sharon Tolliday," Flint said to the first person they met.

The golden-eyed man eyed her and grinned. "You don't

want her, pussycat, not when you can have me.” He reached out to stroke her hair. “Maybe your two friends would like to watch—”

Quicker than Chris could blink, Flint grabbed the hand and folded it into a painful wristlock.

“*Ughh!*”

Flint’s face was calm, but her eyes burned malevolently. “My name is Flint, not pussycat. I think you owe my friends an apology.”

“*Sorry...*” he hissed in pain as Flint applied pressure to his trapped wrist. “Sharon’s over there.” He pointed along the corridor with his free hand.

Chris turned in time to see a frightened looking woman talking to a man all in black. There was something about him that... she gaped. “*Ryder!*” she yelled and gave chase as the man bolted out the fire door. “Grab Sharon, someone grab Sharon!” she yelled as she ran.

She pulled her gun and slammed out the door into bright sunlight. She spun in a circle, but she couldn’t see him. She dashed to the corner in time to scare the daylights out of a woman. The woman dropped her broom, raising her hands and cowering away from the gun. Chris sprinted back the other way and around the other side of the club. Nothing. She headed back just as Flint burst out of the club and nearly got shot for her trouble. Chris lowered her weapon and holstered it.

“He’s gone. I lost him!” she snarled angrily at Flint as if it was her fault. Chris shook with adrenalin rush. She wanted to hit something, but made do with kicking a nearby trash can. “We had him. We had the bastard!”

Ken pushed Sharon through the door. “We’ll get him. Sharon will help, won’t you, Sharon?”

Sharon Tolliday was a shifter; her golden eyes attested to that. Chris wanted to make Ken let her go—shifters were dangerous—but she didn’t dare show weakness. Besides, a more pitiable werewolf she had never seen. Sharon’s eyes

darted about seeking escape, or Ryder, maybe both. Ryder had put the fear of the goddess into her with his questions, and now the police wanted to know the same kinds of things. She was ready to bolt.

"Easy there," Chris said, patting the air in front of the terrified girl. A shiver ran up her spine at the look of wide-eyed panic on Sharon's face. "You're okay... let her go, Ken."

"But—"

"Let her go, Ken!"

Ken stepped carefully away.

Her fear for Ken eased a little. She kept her voice low and her words non-threatening. "You have to control it, Sharon. Don't let the fear make you do something stupid. Attacking a police officer is a death sentence for your kind. Remember that."

"Stinking cop," Sharon snarled. Her voice was deeper than it should be and sounded barely human. She was into the Change. "We're not afraid of you."

*We?*

Chris' neck hairs were at attention. Flint moved, but Chris glared at her, and she halted. "Ease down girl, everyone ease down. We're not here for you, Sharon. You know that, right?"

Sharon panted and shook with the need to rip off her clothes and change, but she was listening. "Ryder..." she growled. "You want Ryder."

"That's right. We want Ryder for killing some of your kind. Do you care that he killed some of your people?"

"Not my people. They're not pack. Not us."

Chris glanced at Flint wondering if she knew what the hell Sharon was talking about. Flint's hand was inside her jacket gripping her needler as if caught in a freeze frame—the act of drawing the weapon stilled forever.

Chris licked suddenly dry lips. A blood bath was in the offing unless she calmed things down. "Tell us what he wanted. Tell us where we can find him, and this is over. You can walk away..." Sharon's fingers ended in claws—*claws!* "You

don't want to hurt us, Sharon. This will never be over for you if you hurt us."

"Hurt you? We'll fucking kill you!" Sharon growled, but she seemed more in control. Her panting had eased, and when she clenched her fists they looked entirely human again.

*Goddess bless me, I didn't see them shift!*

Her legs felt wobbly, but she kept her voice level. "Did he ask you about Rebecca? Maybe where to find her?"

"Not Rebecca, he said he knows where she is."

"And does he?" Ken asked, sensing things were calming down.

Sharon sneered. "How the hell should I know; he didn't tell me, did he? He wants Jay, *my Jay!*"

"You and Jason Kirkwood are an item?" Chris asked, thinking she might be able to use Sharon to get Jay to come in voluntarily.

"We have a few laughs."

"Do you know Rebecca Cairns' whereabouts?"

Sharon's eyes faded back to a blue-grey color as Chris watched, but she wasn't reassured. A shifter could go over the edge quicker than she could blink.

"Rebecca said she needed to go out of town for a week or two; something about her dad."

"And you believed that?"

Sharon looked at her scornfully. "Do I look stupid? I can read a newspaper just as well as you can, *human*." She put years of contempt into that word. "Ryder is after Marty."

"But he wants Jason too. What did you tell him? Did you tell Ryder where to find him?"

"I told him his Dad wouldn't tell me where he is."

"But Ben Kirkwood doesn't know where his son..." Ken began and then nodded. "You lied."

Sharon sneered. "I had to say something, didn't I? Ryder was going to *kill* me!"

"And now Ryder will go after Jason's father," Flint said coldly.

"So? He's not pack either."

Chris shook her head in disgust. Shifter politics; who the hell but another shifter could understand it? She didn't understand—or care to understand—what Sharon was going on about; not unless it affected her investigation. Hell, she didn't care about human politics come to that.

Sharon had set up Jay's father as a distraction, but would Ryder take the bait? She frowned thoughtfully as Ken and Flint continued the questioning. Cappy would okay it if she asked for a stakeout of Kirkwood's store, he was under pressure to produce some results, but was it worth the time and resources? She nodded to herself. It was worth it. They couldn't afford to risk Ryder attacking Kirkwood. The media would explode with recriminations if they learned the police had known of the possibility ahead of time.

"Who is your alpha?" Flint asked. "Give me a name, someone to contact."

Fear blossomed on Sharon's face. "I can't tell you that... you know I can't! *You're not pack!*"

"Give me something, or I'm taking you in."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Chris said just then catching up. "We are not taking her in."

Sharon looked gratefully at Chris and a glimmer of a smile appeared on her face. Ken looked as puzzled Chris felt. He obviously didn't understand why Flint wanted to take Sharon in.

Flint glared angrily at Chris. "She's holding out on us."

"But not about Ryder."

"I don't care! She knows more than she's telling."

"Do you?" Chris asked Sharon. "If you do and I find out later..."

"I don't, I swear!"

She nodded. "Let's go."

Ken moved to follow her.

Flint said something to Sharon that made the girl back hard toward the fire door, and then hurried to follow Chris.

She was fuming mad when she caught up and grabbed Chris' shoulder to spin her around.

"You listen to me," Flint snarled in her face. "If you ever undercut me again I'll have you removed from this case! Are you hearing me, Lieutenant?"

"Let go of me," Chris said quietly.

Flint looked in surprise at her hand where it still gripped Chris' shoulder. She let go, and stepped back a little.

"Don't ever put hands on me, *not ever*. This is my investigation, not yours. I don't need your permission or sanction for whatever I decide to do... besides, we don't need Sharon. Ryder is going after Jay through his father and we know where. I'm going to Cappy with what we know."

"Stakeout?" Ken asked.

Chris nodded.

Flint clenched her fists. "Ryder will know you're there. I know shifters. He won't turn up and we'll lose Sharon. She'll bolt, and I know she knows where Jay is!"

"How?"

"I just know."

She shook her head. "Not good enough. Ryder will go after Ben Kirkwood, I'd bet my pension on it. He's arrogant like all shifters. They think nothing can touch them. Well I can touch them. He'll go for it; I guarantee it. When he does, I'll be there. If you want to go play with Sharon, be my guest, but don't bother me with it. Ken and I are going back to Central. Coming?"

Flint hesitated. "You're wrong. I'm going after Sharon."

Chris started toward the car. Over her shoulder she said, "You'll need transport. I'll call a unit to pick you both up."

Ken hesitated, but then trotted after Chris. "We can't leave her."

"It's her choice, Ken."

"But Sharon is a shifter for the Lady's sake. Flint could get herself hurt."

She cringed. Maybe she should stay and help... she shook

off her sudden uncertainty. What was she thinking? Flint could take care of herself. If she knew shifters even half as well as she claimed, and Chris had no reason to doubt it, Flint would be fine.

"You want to stay? Stay."

"You're my partner," Ken said, sounding a little sulky. "I'm with you as always, but just so you know: you're wrong in this."

"Noted."

Back at Central, Cappy heard Chris out and nodded. "Approved, Lieutenant. I'll sign off on the overtime. You can have Carlson and Baxter for your off-shift; they've been crying over losing the case. This should make them happy."

She nodded her thanks and made to leave his office, but then she turned back. "Just so you know the facts, Cappy. Flint doesn't agree with this move. She thinks Ryder will sniff us out or something and not go for it. She might be right, it's possible at least, but something tells me I'm right. He'll go for it."

Cappy's eyes narrowed. "Is she giving you a hard time? I told her any of that and I'd have her arse."

"Nothing I can't handle."

"You're sure? Fed or no, she goes if she breaks her word to me. No one pisses in my pool without my say so."

She grimaced at his choice of metaphor. "I wouldn't have said anything, but I think she might come to you over Sharon Tolliday."

"The dancer?"

"Right. Ryder had her cornered when we got to Area 51, and was asking questions. Flint thinks Sharon is holding out on us. Jason is her cutie; she might know where he's hiding. Flint thinks so anyway."

"And you?"

She shrugged. "It's possible... hell, she probably does and Flint is probably right—about Sharon anyway. Where

we differ is in how much it matters. I still think Ryder is an arrogant sonofabitch. He won't care that we know what Sharon told him. He won't hold back. Flint disagrees."

"Where is she now?"

"In Interview One sweating Sharon over Jason's whereabouts."

Thank the Goddess Flint had brought Sharon in without trouble. Ken's silence in the car on the way back to Central had given Chris plenty of time to worry over her decision to leave Flint on her own. It was a bad decision. She could admit it now. She had let her annoyance with Flint and her loss of Ryder get the better of her. It was a cardinal rule of hers—and department policy—to never approach a shifter without backup. They were more than dangerous when provoked.

"Okay, leave Flint to me." Cappy checked the time. "You're off shift. Are you planning to take first or second watch at Kirkwood's place?"

"I'm thinking Ryder will wait for dark... you think I'm right?"

Cappy's lips twitched. "Nice of you to remember that I worked the streets, Chris. Night works for me. Monsters like the dark, it's traditional."

She smirked. "Yeah, traditional. I'm taking the nightshift with Ken."

"Thought so. You better take yourself off. Mark isn't going to be too happy when he hears."

"We have an understanding. He doesn't mess with my work, and I don't turn up at his meetings with a warrant."

Cappy chuckled and waved her out the door.

\* \* \*

## Stakeout

Chris eased the car around the corner, switched off the headlights, and coasted the last few hundred yards before slowing to a halt behind Baxter's car. She could just see Jimmy's silhouette in the front passenger seat as evening gave way to night.

"My turn," she said, opening her door.

"Be my guest," Ken mumbled around a ham roll. "Ask them if Flint is still giving them trouble."

"Save some for later. I'm not going to keep making them if you eat them all before midnight."

"Have a heart, Chris. If you hadn't joined the Department you could have opened your own restaurant."

"Butt kisser," she said with a grin and slammed the door.

She ambled along the rapidly emptying street; it had long since become familiar to her. A week of staking out Kirkwood's store had garnered her precisely nothing except Ken's appreciation of her culinary skills; present him with food, and he was anybody's.

She knocked on the passenger window of Baxter's car, and Jimmy rolled it down. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Hiya, Chris."

She waved a hand in front of her face. "How many times do I have to say it, Jimmy? Bring some breath mints on these things."

"I don't like mints."

She climbed into the back of the car. "Anything?"

Baxter grunted. "Squat. I know this is your show now—"

"That's right, it is."

"—but I think Flint is onto something. Ryder—that arsehole—isn't coming. He would have to be a complete idiot to try for Kirkwood in front of us."

"Or so confident he doesn't care if we see him," Jimmy added.

Or something they haven't thought of, Chris mused. "Flint hasn't done any better with her approach. I still think this is our best shot. Has she made an appearance round here?"

Baxter nodded. "She came to see Kirkwood again. She didn't look pleased when she left."

"Say anything?"

"Nah, she wouldn't talk about it. She was seriously pissed, I can tell you that."

She smirked. "Good."

Jimmy laughed. "You really don't like her do you? What is it with the two of you? Someone said..."

"Said what?"

"Nothing."

"Don't make me hurt you, Jimmy," she warned. "Give."

"It's nothing, just something making the rounds back at Central. If you must know, people are saying Flint made a play for Ken and you busted her chops for it. They reckon you're jealous."

Her jaw dropped and she felt her face grow hot. "Oh that's just great. Perfect!"

Jimmy chuckled and even Baxter grinned.

"No truth to it is there? Ow!" Baxter glared and rubbed his shoulder. "What was that for?"

"Something to make me feel better," she said grumpily. "I

don't need this on top of everything else. I thought the guys had some respect, if not for me, at least for a fellow officer. Ken is my partner. It would be like incest or something, and besides, I'm getting married in a couple of months."

"Don't take everything so serious," Jimmy said with a pained sigh. "They're only funning. They joke about me and Baxter all the time, and you don't hear us complaining."

"What?" Baxter said with a start. "What have those bastards been saying? I'll—"

Jimmy waved his partner silent. "They do respect you, Chris. They know you'd kick their butts if they didn't!"

"You bet I would."

"And anyway, you're not Ken's type."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" She said, wanting to suck in her gut. This week's extra sessions in the gym had so far failed to show up on the scales.

Jimmy just chuckled and shook his head.

Her glare gave way under the assault of his laughter and she smiled. She was being ridiculous. She didn't want to be Ken's type.

"I want to know what they're saying about me," Baxter growled, and that set off another round of laughter.

She climbed out of the car still grinning and watched it pull away. Baxter was questioning Jimmy and threatening dire consequences for the rumor-mongers.

Chris watched the hurrying pedestrians heading home, and wondered what it was like being them living among monsters. The locals called the Waterfront District Monster Central, and with good reason. Compared with other cities Monster Central had the highest concentration of non-human residents and businesses bar none. The people living here cheek by jowl with the monsters had a unique perspective on the problem of non-human integration. She wondered what they thought about the proposed amendments to the Constitution.

She climbed back into her car to find Ken munching on

a bag of chips reading his horoscope. He offered her the bag, and she took a generous handful. She ignored his indignant squawk, and pulled half of the newspaper out of his lap. She draped it over the steering wheel where she could read and keep an eye on the street at the same time.

“You really buy into that don’t you?”

Ken smiled without looking up. “You know I do.”

“But even the gifted say its bullshit.”

“There are many kinds of magic,” he said piously.

“Yeah, and that kind is bullshit,” she said with a grin. It was an old bone of contention between them, and always a good way to pass the time on a stakeout. “Ask a mage about the stars, and he’ll tell you all they’re good for is summer nights and poetry.”

“Ask a witch and she’ll tell you everything is connected. If you know how to look, the stars can tell you a lot.”

She shook her head and began reading her half of the paper. Ed Davis must surely have a contact in the Department. His latest story about the Shifter Slayings had pride of place on the front page and his information was spot on. She sighed and turned the paper over, determined not to read anything Davis had written.

The top story this time was about the Amendment Lobby and their efforts to push their agenda through congress. All kinds of interesting people had signed on and were using their influence to help things along. That so many non-humans had an interest in the proposed amendments wasn’t a surprise, but some of the names on the list were. NSPCL was high on the list of influential backers of course, and that meant Techtron—and its money—was too, but what was ex-president Irvine doing there? There was also a strong contingent of mages listed, though the Council itself had remained neutral. Perhaps the most surprising name on the list was Winterwing. Why did a dragon care whether non-humans got the vote or not? His place as presidential advisor was secure no matter the outcome.

"Do you ever wonder what the world would be like without magic?" she asked, turning the page.

"Sometimes."

"I think it would be better."

"Different anyway."

"Different and better."

Ken folded his half of the paper and tossed it on the back seat. "I don't know about better. Easier on us though."

She nodded. "No worrying about getting hexed."

"You always bring that up, Chris. It only happened that one time."

"Once was enough for me." She shivered, feeling again that sense of desperation she had felt when the hex paralyzed her. Unable to move or even breathe, she would have died if not for Ken. "What about this amendment business?"

"What about it?"

"No magic, no monsters."

"Doesn't follow. Didn't your Dad teach you anything?"

Chris looked at him sharply, but he was grinning. "That's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"Hand me the binoculars would you? I think I saw something up ahead."

"You're not getting out of it that easy, Ken. How did Flint find out about my Dad?"

"I didn't tell her... I didn't, *I swear!*"

"How did she know to ask about him then?"

"She already knew everything. I wouldn't tell anyone about stuff like that behind your back, Chris. You should know that. She already knew about your Dad being a witch when she brought it up with me. She must have read your file and did some digging. She did ask me how you felt about it, but I told her to ask you, which she did that day at Collard."

Chris pursed her lips as if trying to decide whether to believe him, but she could tell he was sincere. What worried her was Flint's interest in her background. If Flint was only after Ryder, why was she digging into her past? What possible

difference could it make that her Dad was a witch?

"Okay, I believe you," she said and Ken relaxed. "I still say no magic means no monsters."

Ken shook his head. "You'll never change."

She glared. "That had better be a compliment."

Ken grinned. He reached onto the back seat for another roll, and ate it in silence.

Less than an hour later it was too dark to read. They didn't want to betray their presence by using a light, so they sat in darkness watching the empty street. Even this late, one or two people wandered into Kirkwood's store. None of them matched Ryder's description.

She snaked a hand onto the back seat and came up with an empty bag. "Tell me you didn't eat everything I brought."

"Of course not," Ken said, exuding injured dignity.

She wasn't sure she believed him, but she nodded acceptance when he reached over the seat and found the other bag she had packed. He stole another roll before she could get to it, but she let it go. While she was eating, Ken poured them both a coffee from the thermos and then took up the binoculars again.

The binoculars were fitted with a gizmo called a low light amplification module and were brand new tech. She and a few others were supposed to test them in the field and report back. They were clunky looking things—entirely non-magical in construction—and provided a fuzzy picture with a faintly greenish cast to it. Magical or not, the old ones in the trunk were a damn sight better, but she wasn't in charge of the Department's budget. Those who managed such things were always looking for ways to make cuts, and magic was expensive.

Chris ate a couple of rolls and drank her coffee. Remembering her advice to Jimmy, she popped a mint into her mouth. She didn't want coffee breath. Ken passed her the binoculars and she studied the street. She watched Kirkwood's customers coming and going and wondered what the hell they

found to buy at this time of night. Why didn't they—

She tensed. "Heads up."

"Is it Ryder?" Ken said eagerly.

She shook her head. It wasn't Ryder, but it was something. There were shadows running back and forth behind the windows of Kirkwood's shop. She was about to suggest they take a look, when someone staggered out the door and collapsed onto the sidewalk.

Chris pulled her weapon and climbed out of the car. She scurried across the road to kneel next to the prone figure. Pressing her fingers to the man's neck, she felt for a pulse and found one. It was faint but there. There was blood running down his face, but scalp wounds always bled a lot. The wound looked superficial. A shopping bag lay discarded on the sidewalk nearby, its contents strewn all over.

"He alive?" Ken asked, peering around the doorjamb into the store.

"Yeah, unconscious."

"Great."

It was great, less paperwork.

"You see anything?" she asked, looking down the central aisle past bottles of shampoo and bars of soap.

"Nothing."

"Me neither. I go first, you back me."

"Okay."

She crept through the door and met frightened eyes. Another customer, this time lying facedown to one side of the door. The woman looked up when she heard help coming.

"How many?" Chris whispered.

The woman didn't answer with words, instead she held up a single finger.

Only one. That was good. Chris scurried down an empty aisle and finally found what she was looking for, or rather she heard it. There were voices raised in anger toward the back of the store. A storeroom? She moved forward and Ken took her place at the end of the aisle to cover her. She kept low and

made it to the door leading to the storeroom.

Two men were inside. One wore a shirt with the store logo on it—Ben Kirkwood—the other wore a nice-looking suit, but she couldn't see his face clearly. He carried a gun loosely in his right hand aimed at the floor. Kirkwood chose that moment to move and obscured her shot. She scowled and shifted to the other side of the doorway just as Ken arrived. He crouched next to the cash register and covered her.

The perp shoved Kirkwood against his desk with a crash, and Chris was able to see his face clearly for the first time. It was Ryder. How the hell had he got by them without being seen? It didn't matter; she had him dead on.

"Ryder!" Chris shouted. "Drop the—"

Ryder spun pulling Kirkwood in front of him.

"—gun!" He had moved so fast that she nearly missed it. One moment she'd had Ryder in her sights, the next Kirkwood. Lucky she hadn't pulled the trigger. "Drop the gun!"

"Ah, Lieutenant Humber finally arrives. How kind of you to join us. I hear you've been entertaining the delightful Miss Tolliday. Did she tell you what her friends did to me? Did she tell you why they did it?"

"Let Kirkwood go, and we can talk about it."

Ryder grinned. "Oh, I do like you."

"The feeling is not mutual," she said, easing to the right a little more. Ryder followed the move and she gained nothing. "You're not walking out of here... Douglas isn't it?"

Ryder nodded.

"You're not walking out, Douglas, not this time. You had your freebie at my expense at Area 51. How did you do that by the way?"

"Magic."

"Really?"

"It surprises you? It shouldn't you know. How many times have you heard of shifters vanishing into a crowd? It's not even magic really, just a part of what we are."

"There were no crowds that day."

Ryder shrugged.

"Drop the gun. We can't stand here all night."

"No, I suppose not."

"Well then?"

Ryder seemed to think about it, but then he tightened his grip on Kirkwood's neck and shook him a little. "If only you knew what this man's son and his friends put me through, you would help me."

"Don't bet on it. Drop the gun, I won't ask again."

"This weapon will stay where it is thank you. You drop yours."

"Not happening," Ken said.

Chris estimated her chances of getting a shot off without hitting Kirkwood. They weren't good. "You can still come out of this ahead. I don't want to kill you."

Ryder chuckled. "How do you know I want to live?"

*Oh crap.*

She moistened her lips. "There's no need for this. You said I might help if I knew. Drop the gun and tell me about it."

"Okay," he said, throwing the gun down.

She winced but it didn't go off. "That's good. Now let him—no!"

Ryder threw Kirkwood at her and made a dash for the door. Ken fired and so did she, but her shot went wild. She killed a can of coffee and not Kirkwood. Lucky.

"Get off me, lard arse!" she yelled, trying to get out from under Kirkwood.

Ken pulled her to her feet. She ran along the aisles and into the night. Damn! She had lost him again... no wait. A shadow darted across the road and into an alley. She pursued.

"Don't, Chris!" Ken shouted at her back. "I'm calling for backup!"

"Bring the car around!" she yelled over her shoulder. She sprinted across the road and stopped at the mouth of the alley. She ducked her head forward and then back. Ryder was still going. "Stop or I'll shoot!" she cried at the sprinting man.

“Damn!”

She held her fire and gave chase, gasping for breath as she sprinted down the fetid alley. Lady bless her, she was out of condition, but she would not give up. No one gave her the slip this easy; not a second time. It made her look a fool and she didn't like that.

She skidded around a corner and caught sight of Ryder ducking into another alley. She ran to the mouth of it and stopped to peek around the corner into the darkness. The shadows tried to trick her eyes into seeing what wasn't there. Her gun was pointing at a stack of garbage before she knew what it was. Panting and shaking with adrenaline rush, she eased into the darkness with her gun leading the way.

“There's no need for this!” she shouted.

A chuckle to her left made her duck and spin in place. She stared at a Dumpster full of stinking refuse; it smelled as if something had crawled in and died. The laughter came again. She fumbled in her jacket pocket and pulled out her little flashlight. She'd bought it when she joined the Department, and it had cost a fortune, but it was worth it. She raised it to her lips and whispered one word.

“Invoke.”

The flashlight activated and light speared the darkness. She played the beam over the alley. Nothing. He must be hiding behind the Dumpster. It was the only thing large enough. She kept both her gun and her flashlight on it and prayed for Ken to hurry.

She tried to moisten her lips but her mouth was dry. “You didn't kill him and that's good. We can still talk.”

The muted sound of traffic in the distance greeted her offer. She would have preferred him to have a chat with a hollow point round, but Cappy had warned her before about things like that. She was supposed to bring them in not execute them.

*Where the hell is Ken?*

“Come out before you make it worse for yourself.”

She edged forward a little, trying to pierce the shadows around the Dumpster. Laughter greeted her; manic, hysterical, laughter. Seconds later, silence slammed down over the alley, shearing the hair-raising sound off mid-breath.

Chris flinched and edged back.

"I couldn't possibly make it worse for myself," Ryder said, his voice full of anger. "You don't know what it's like. You really don't... or do you? Of course you don't. How could you? Only someone who has been through it can know how it feels to lose everything."

Chris swallowed shakily. How could she have been so stupid? How many times had she warned Ken never to chase a monster without backup? She had broken one of her own cardinal rules. Lady what a fool she was. She snaked a hand behind her back and pulled the Defender II from her waistband. She transferred it to her right hand before dropping the Remington into her jacket pocket.

Ryder chuckled. "You should have brought Flint with you. She and I go back a ways, did you know that? Where is she... where is your backup, Lieutenant?"

Ryder's insane laughter battered her ears again. Sweat trickled down her spine. Her legs were shaking and her knees felt wobbly. She tried to force herself to breathe evenly. She took a careful step back, and then another. The laughter pursued her. She backed faster, keeping her gun trained on the Dumpster where it sat trapped in the beam of her flashlight. Her heart was thudding loudly in her chest; surely it was loud enough to be heard down the alley.

The laughter ceased and a rustle of movement broke the sudden silence. She aborted her plan to flee. If she fired the instant he appeared, she might get lucky and... it was too late to plan.

"Should I show her?" Ryder muttered. "Do you think she'll be impressed? All right then."

Before she could think about what he had said, the monster Ryder had become came for her in a rush of speed

no man or woman could match. It was huge. A four-legged and furred creature bigger by far than any dog she had ever seen. It wasn't a dog, but neither was it a wolf. A pair of golden eyes glared at her malevolently from a wolf-like head, but its muscular body made it appear a twisted caricature—part man, part wolf. It was a creature out of nightmare, neither one thing nor the other but both. He was almost on her before her brain caught up and sent the signal to her finger.

*Blaam! Blaam!*

Two shots rang out and hit Ryder in the chest, but he kept coming. He was on her in less than a heartbeat. His golden eyes were fixated upon her vulnerable throat. He snarled revealing a mouth full of sharp fangs. She crashed to the ground under his weight and fired twice more into his chest.

*Blaam! Blaam!*

"Please don't..." she whispered just as his huge jaws clamped down.

Pain beyond anything she had ever felt erupted in her neck and shoulder. She screamed long and hard, beating frantically on its head with her gun. The beast shook her in its massive jaws as if annoyed at her defiance, and flung her aside. She crashed into something and flopped to the ground.

*Dumpster.*

Still screaming at the burning agony in her wounded shoulder, she fired until her gun clicked empty.

*Blaam! Blaam! Blaam! Blaam! Click, click.*

Her head rolled from side to side as she tried to focus bleary eyes on Ryder. She was in shock. She knew what it was like from past experience. Her good hand, still holding her gun raised, shook so badly she almost dropped it. Sweat suddenly burst out all over her, but her teeth were chattering. She was hot and cold—her senses reeled.

*Got to stop the bleeding... oh Lady, where is he... it?*

She ignored the bleeding and fumbled one handed for her spare magazine, but her pocket was empty. It must have fallen out. She reached awkwardly for the Remington, but her

fumbling fingers couldn't seem to grasp it. She blinked sweat out of her eyes trying to see Ryder. Her flashlight lay discarded upon the ground, but its beam still faithfully illuminated the alley... and what it contained. She watched Ryder approach with a grin of fear and pain locked on her face.

"AEiiiiiiiiii!" she screamed as his jaws clamped down on her arm.

Ryder started to drag her up the alley, and she kicked him as hard as she could in the ribs with the pointed toe of her boot. He howled and raked her with his talons. Her clothes were ripped apart, and fresh agony seared through her as his claws buried themselves in her belly. She screamed and screamed as the monstrous creature went into frenzy at the smell of her blood, but such pain could not be endured forever.

Silence fell over the alley. There was no pain now, no sense of anything except floating gently upward. She stared unblinking past the golden-eyed monster as he shook her to and fro.

\* \* \*

## Shifter

“And now closer to home,” the news anchor said with a gentle smile.

Ken watched the vid behind the bar with tired and haunted eyes. He raised his glass, threw back his head, and swallowed the bourbon with one convulsive gulp. He grimaced at the taste before slamming the glass back down on the bar.

“Hey, cut that out!”

“Another.”

“You’ve had enough, buddy,” Larry said, more kindly this time.

Ken didn’t want kindness; he wanted that night not to have happened. He wanted to sleep without nightmares, and to be able to think about his partner without seeing an alley covered in her blood. Oh Lady, he wanted to stop seeing the pathetic dying remnant of a woman he had found that night.

He slammed his hand down on the bar and removed it to reveal his badge lying there. “Another.”

“Okay, okay. You want to kill yourself, go ahead. Its not my—”

Ken gritted his teeth. “I’m not in the mood for a lecture.”

“*Fine!*” Larry banged a bottle down next to the badge and

liquor sloshed onto the sticky bar. "Pour it yourself."

Larry turned and stalked away in disgust.

Ken ignored Larry's grumbling and poured a triple. He looked at it and drank it down. He coughed a little at the harshness. He wasn't much of a drinker usually. A beer with friends normally satisfied him, but things were far from normal.

He took a handful of nuts from the bowl Larry always left out and ate them before pouring another drink. The broken-down robot that Larry refused to part with seemed to look on him with pity in its glassy eyes. The pathetic thing was so old it could hardly move from its spot behind the bar. It pre-dated Larry's ownership of the place, but he had refused to get a new one, insisting it was some kind of lucky charm. Besides, he was happy to tend bar himself and didn't need help, robotic or otherwise.

Ken turned his attention back to his drinking. He needed to chase the image of Chris' ripped and mauled body out of his head for a few hours. He squeezed his eyes shut so hard they hurt, but still he saw her.

"Ken?"

He didn't look up from the bar. "Any news?"

Flint sat beside him. "Nothing yet. You okay?"

Ken frowned and considered the question. "No... I don't think I am. I can't believe that asshole Grinely never showed up. I went round there and told him what had happened. I even offered to give him a ride to the hospital, but he said he wanted to make his own way there. I can't believe the bastard never showed... I just can't believe it."

"You can't blame him."

"Why not? Why the hell not?" Ken asked angrily. "They're getting married! That means something. It means you love each other no matter what happens! She loves him, Flint, she really does and that asshole..." He took another pull on his drink. "I feel like beating the crap out of him."

The silence stretched out.

Larry came by and Flint nodded at Ken's choice of drink, holding two fingers up. Larry poured her a double, but he obviously disapproved. It was almost funny—a barman disapproving of his customers wanting a drink. Ken didn't laugh though. He felt wrung out, as if all the laughter had been squeezed out of him leaving nothing but rage.

"She'll make it."

"Don't!" Ken said harshly. "Just don't, okay? I don't want to hear how she'll be okay. I want to see it. You don't know how many times I've heard that kind of thing. Everyone says it when one of us goes down, and no one really means it."

"I know, and I do mean it, Ken. I've been where you are. It's never easy losing a partner."

"I didn't lose her! She was stolen... besides, she's not gone yet."

Flint remained wisely silent and threw back her drink in a convulsive swallow. She shuddered and gently replaced the glass on the bar. At some other time, Ken might have mentioned the inadvisability of a woman drinking so hard, but he simply copied her and raised the bottle for a refill. Flint covered her glass with a hand and shook her head when he made to replenish hers.

"I wasn't always a Fed," Flint said, staring at her empty glass and not bothering to check if Ken was listening. "I was a cop back east—Homicide. My partner and I were called to a scene. There were bodies all over the place. Shot in the head, in the chest, in the guts. Some hopped-up bastard had gone into the mall and just started shooting. Anyway, Jess and I caught up with him and took him down. Afterward we helped the med techs go through the place looking for anyone still alive, and Jess found one. He'd been hit bad. I couldn't see how he had a hope of making it."

"A shifter?"

"We didn't know then, but yeah. Jess sort of covered the holes in his chest with her hands so he could breathe, and waited for the techs to come, but he woke up and attacked

her. Hell, it wasn't even the poor guy's fault. He was in a lot of pain and coming awake like that... well anyway, they executed him later of course. I feel kind of sorry about that now, but not then."

"And your partner?"

"Jess survived the attack, but you know..." Flint shrugged. "Everything was different for her after that. About a year later she committed suicide."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I. We were more than just partners; it wasn't just the job with us."

"Yeah. Chris and me have always been tight. You probably heard about her first partner, huh?"

Flint nodded.

"John died in the line. Chris was really broken up about it, but then I got partnered with her... oh boy, was she a hard arse! She didn't want anything to do with me. She even went to Cappy to get me reassigned, but he wasn't having any of it. He's been through it, so he knew what was in her head."

"She went after the one who killed her partner?" Flint guessed.

"Stanton, yeah. She tracked that mother for months, smashing every stinking deal he made, rousting every lowlife weasel he'd ever known until no one—not even his own people—would go near him. Up 'til then he'd been a big man, one with connections, but Chris hounded him until he had no choice but to take her out. When he tried, she killed him."

Flint's eyes flickered. "I've read her file."

"I figured. Anyway, Stanton clipped her before she took him out, and that made her cranky. Cappy put her on a desk for weeks. She would have done anything to get back to the streets... even if it meant taking Baxter for her partner!"

"He's not that bad. He's just misunderstood."

Ken snorted. "If you say so."

Flint grinned but then she sobered abruptly. "Listen Ken, you're going to hear this sooner or later, so I'll tell you now."

"Tell me what?"

"The Bureau has sent another agent. I'm on my way to a meeting with him now."

"They're not reassigning you are they?"

Flint shook her head. "As far as I know we'll still be working to find Ryder, but it will be a separate investigation. Captain Stokes was told this morning."

Ken frowned. The attack on Chris might warrant a separate federal investigation. Might. She was a police officer attacked by a shifter after all, but why duplicate all the effort already put in on the case? It was a waste of resources.

"I don't get it," he said. "Why split up now?"

"It's not my decision."

Ken glared. "It sure as hell is! You can have an opinion. You could have told them it was a bad idea to split up the team."

"You don't understand, Ken. I can't tell you everything, but the agent I'm to meet outranks me. He's here to find out how and why I screwed up."

"You didn't screw up. If anyone did, it was me. I should have stopped her going after Ryder. I should have been there with her."

"You mean instead of her, don't you?"

He scowled. "I said with, I meant with." Flint stared at him with knowing eyes and he looked away. "What are you going to tell him?"

"The truth of course. I'll tell him I let Chris piss me off, that I let my personal feelings get in the way of my job and let her push me out of the stakeout."

"Goddess..." he breathed in dismay. "Don't be an idiot!"

"I am an idiot. If I'd been there, Chris wouldn't have been hurt. I guarantee you that."

It was his turn to stare. Flint's face looked hard and her eyes glittered malevolently. He didn't doubt she believed what she said, but it was crazy talk. No human could match a shifter one on one.

Flint stood. "I've got to go. If you need someone to talk to..."

"I'll call."

Flint nodded and left.

Ken poured himself another drink and returned his attention to the news report.

"...in protest for the lack of funding. Sources in the police department have indicated the situation will continue to worsen until proper legislation can be passed securing police officers the right to carry suitable ammunition for these situations. Here's our reporter, Ed Davis, with the latest. Ed."

The picture split to show Sue in the studio looking solemnly at a screen showing a scene miles away. Davis was standing outside a building with a crowd of people in the background holding placards and shouting.

"Thanks, Sue. As you can see behind me, the protesters are very vocal on this issue. The attack on homicide detective, Chris Humber, by an as yet unnamed lycanthrope—the sixth such attack this year—has sparked off an even bigger debate regarding preternatural creatures."

"You said *preternatural* creatures," Sue said in a staged question.

Davis nodded. "That's right, Sue. President Mitchell used the label to describe any creature falling outside of the mundane during his speech before congress two weeks ago."

Ken clenched a fist in anger at the thought of giving monsters even more freedom to kill and maim. It wasn't right!

"...include magical or supernatural?"

"That's one of the main issues, Sue. Concerns have already been raised regarding the proposed removal of such classifications as paranormal, supernatural, and magical from the Constitution. As you can hear behind me, many people are opposed to relaxing the restrictions. They're campaigning hard to have what they call monsters put down." Davis turned to a man standing a short distance from him. "Professor

Goddard, you have been very vocal in your denouncement of the government's handling of the situation."

"That is correct," Goddard said. "This government—and President Mitchell in particular—has adopted a wait and see policy that has cost lives and destroyed families. What happened to Chris Humber this week merely emphasizes my point. I have stated in no uncertain terms, that these creatures are dangerous and should be tagged for the good of all. I hesitate to go further and support the suggestion of Mr. Newman, but—"

"I'm sorry, Professor," Davis broke in, "but our audience might not be aware of Mr. Newman's stance on the subject. Do you mean his suggestion regarding the eradication of those creatures deviating from the mundane?"

"Essentially yes. Many of President Mitchell's preternatural creatures are beneficial to the world, but unfortunately these so-called *good* creatures are in the minority."

"Give us an example."

"Well I..." Goddard said, clearly not expecting the question. "I would class the dragons as good for instance, and of course any undead creature is by its very nature evil."

"Why by its nature?"

"Vampires and ghouls require the living blood of their victims to survive and—"

"Yes, but by your definition Humans are evil too. Do we not require the death of animals to live?"

"It's not the same at all! We don't go out and attack people—"

"Some of us do just that, Professor, but I do take your point. You would advise President Mitchell to destroy these creatures then?"

Goddard grimaced. "I'm not one of Newman's AML fanatics, Edward. I would advise the President to weed out those creatures that are inimical to us, but he will not."

"Weed out? You mean kill them don't you?" Davis asked, but before the Professor could answer, he hurried on. "By

stating the President will not follow your advice, you are referring to his speech emphasizing tolerance?"

"That and his move toward integrating them more fully into society."

"Thank you for your thoughts, Professor." Davis turned back to the camera. "Whatever the decision regarding these very special people, one thing remains clear. Amendment or no, they will find scant acceptance in Chris Humber's neighborhood. Over to you, Sue."

"Thanks, Ed," Sue said with a small smile. "That was Ed Davis live outside of President Mitchell's campaign headquarters."

Ken stood to leave. He couldn't stomach listening to anymore of this. They should ask someone who knew what he was talking about. He could have told them what to do about the monsters. Kill them all! No matter how they looked, shifters weren't human. It was time he realized that and acted accordingly.

"Hey," Larry said. "You forgot your badge."

He stopped and turned to look at it on the bar. It had meant something once, it had meant a lot, but now he didn't know what to feel. He picked it up.

"Thanks Larry. I owe you one."

"No problem."

\* \* \*

David Lephmann had chosen to arrive early in order to familiarize himself with the studio surroundings. Unfamiliar things always unsettled his kind. Ronnie had accompanied him, of course. She rarely left his side. Lawrence had opted to wait in the car. The studio lights and unfamiliar scents of camera crew and stagehands would have driven him buggy. They had certainly affected David that way at first.

"Take off your shirt, please," the sound tech said in a breathy voice.

He gritted his teeth. She was a seeker. The way she looked at him with her too bright eyes and flushed cheeks shouted it. Ronnie rolled her eyes at him in amusement. It might have been funny to her, but to him it was an intrusion he did not need. It made him wish for Lawrence's presence. Another male might have lured the silly bitch away from him.

Under the burning eyes of the sound tech, he took off his shirt and let her wire him for the microphone, which she did with lots of accidental caresses. She stroked his back with the backs of her fingers as she tucked the relay into the waistband of his trousers, and then she laid hands on him while he put his shirt back on over the wires.

"I have to make sure they don't show," she said, breathing on him.

He snarled inside, but outwardly he was calm, calm, calm. He didn't need any more bad publicity. Not today of all days.

SOUND TECH FOUND MURDERED IN STUDIO.  
POLICE BAFFLED.

He didn't quite snort at his imaginary headline. He buttoned buttons as fast as he could. "I'm sure it will be fine."

"You wouldn't want me to lose my job would you?"

*Would he!*

"Of course not," he said, allowing her caress. "Why don't you use magic for all this?"

"We do most times, but I thought the mundane equipment would make a nice change."

He gritted his teeth in anger. Equipment of a magical nature did not use wires, so of course she wanted to use a mundane microphone. He felt like ripping her head off for that. Ronnie edged the technician aside and helped David with his tie and jacket. The disgruntled tech stalked away, only to be replaced a second or so later with the makeup artist. A tall man, he easily topped David by six inches. He

wore a bright orange silk shirt with lace at collars and cuffs. The style—popular among college students—didn't suit his pale complexion at all. Not wanting to hurt his feelings, David refrained from telling him.

"Hello there," the makeup artist said, offering a limp hand to shake. "Swen's the name."

"David." He shook hands and indicated Ronnie. "May I introduce my good friend and assistant Ronnie Burdett?"

"Charmed I'm sure," Swen said, squeezing Ronnie's hand briefly. "They sent me over to fix your face, David, but there isn't much time... *quick*, grab that seat before someone else does!"

Ronnie grabbed the chair and Swen pushed David down into it.

"They never give me enough time," Swen muttered as he rummaged in the box at his feet. Similar to a mechanic's toolbox, it contained all his powders, paints, and brushes. "I'm an artist by the Goddess. It's intolerable the way they treat me. No mirrors, no lights..."

David sat silently through the muttering. Swen finally found what he wanted and went to work. Creams and powders came and went. David tried hard not to let his agitation boil over. He hated the feel of the brush on his face, and the nauseating smell of the products Swen chose to use threatened to make him heave. He suffered in silence.

"There we are." Swen stepped back. "We can't have you all shiny-nosed can we?"

"No," David growled. He softened that, "thank you."

"You're welcome. Just wait until I tell my boyfriend I did a shifter. He'll just die!"

*No doubt.*

David waited for the commercial break and quickly took his place. He grimaced as he sat next to Susan. His seat was still warm.

"Everything all right?" Sue asked, noticing his expression.

"Fine."

“There’s no need to be nervous. Just take your queues from me and answer my questions. I’m sure you’ll do a great job.”

David nodded, letting her condescension go. He settled himself comfortably and watched the clock cycle toward zero. Ronnie stood in the shadows behind camera three and smiled at him. He could smell her pleasant earthy scent even from here despite being assaulted by dozens of others in the studio. It was something familiar amidst the strangeness. It calmed him having one of his own kind nearby, especially a bitch.

He noted the many differing reactions his presence provoked. The cameramen smelled of boredom and sweat, the stagehands smelled of sweat and fear—they knew what he was. Sue smelled of frilly things and flowers. The combination was particularly off-putting—like being trapped in a whore’s boudoir. Rancid meat would have been preferable.

The clock reached zero.

“Welcome back,” Sue said, smiling professionally for the cameras. “In the studio today we have someone intimately familiar with the issue regarding preternatural creatures. David Lephmann, President of NSPCL and a self-confessed lycanthrope. Welcome to the show.”

“Thank you, Sue. It’s good to be here,” he said then smiled. If his ease surprised her, Sue gave no sign of it. Even her scent remained unchanged; sickening, but unchanged.

“Why don’t we start with an explanation of what the NSPCL is and what it does.”

He nodded. “Very simply, it stands for the National Society for the Preservation and Conservation of Lycanthropes, and what it does is provide support and help for lycanthropes of all types.”

“I see. So your organization helps werewolves—”

“Not just wolves, Sue. Any werecreature can expect our full support and help.”

“I see,” Sue said with a smile a little less warm for his interruption. “Your organization doesn’t welcome other

preternatural creatures then?”

“Not specifically, but we will help on occasion if the situation warrants it. We do—as I’m sure you’re aware, Sue—have close ties with other organizations whose members are classified as being beyond the mundane.”

Sue glanced at her notes. “Now that we have some background, perhaps you would care to comment on the current debate.”

“Certainly. In my opinion, this debate on whether to legislate against people different from the majority is reprehensible. It’s tantamount to genocide.”

“Harsh words—”

“Death is a harsh reality we all must face. Organizations such as the Anti Monster League would imprison my people in death camps to be exterminated.”

Sue’s eyes widened and darted uncertainly to her producer. He nodded enthusiastically and signaled her to continue. “There has been no suggestion of that, Mr. Lephmann.”

“Professor Goddard suggested it less than an hour ago live on this very programme. We are people like any other. Some of us are kind and decent; others are less kind—just like people everywhere. President Mitchell’s proposed amendments are a huge step forward for anyone believing in justice and equality.”

“I can see how the amendments would please *your* people, Mr. Lephmann, but what of Techtron? What does any corporation have to gain from backing the Amendment Lobby?”

David hesitated. Sue had deviated from the autocue without warning. He had been half-expecting something to go wrong, but not this.

“I’m here today representing the NSPCL, not Techtron.”

“But isn’t it true that you’re also Techtron’s CEO as well as spokesman for the Amendment Lobby?”

“Yes of course, but—”

“You wear so many hats, Mr. Lephmann. Isn’t there a

conflict of interest inherent in representing so many diverse organizations?”

David smiled. “Not at all, Sue. Their interests coincide. The Amendment Lobby is composed of various non-human groups; each having their own needs and desires, but paramount among these is the aim of securing equal rights. Currently they cannot vote, they cannot hold public office, they are excluded from venues and businesses of all kinds—places their human counterparts may enter freely. As a result, their ability to earn a decent living and pay their taxes is compromised—”

“And Techtron wants to help them out of the goodness of its heart,” Sue said abruptly, interrupting David before he could take over her interview and use it to promote the Amendment Lobby’s agenda.

David quickly changed tack. “Techtron is a multi-billion dollar corporation. I very much doubt your viewers would believe me if I said its involvement was altruistic.” Leaning back, he interlocked his fingers and smiled. “No, Sue, as always Techtron’s investors want a good return on their investment. Higher returns require higher profits. That is the plain truth of the matter. Techtron’s board of directors believe that expanding our policy of hiring non-humans would greatly decrease our overhead.”

“Cheap labor you mean.”

“That’s harsh, Sue, and too simplistic. Mr. Newman and others might dispute me in this, but non-humans are physically superior to humans—”

Sue’s eyes gleamed with a predatory light. “You call yourself superior? A strange thing to say considering your platform is based upon equality.”

David forced himself to chuckle. It was a struggle not to get angry, but then it was always that way for his kind.

“You misunderstand. What I said was that non-humans are *physically superior* to humans. They are generally stronger and have greater stamina, so they can work harder for longer.”

“Working harder for longer argues *for*, not against, my point, Mr. Lephmann.”

“Techtron’s salaries are significantly higher than those of our nearest competitors, Sue. Unlike other companies, our pay grades are based upon an employee’s ability not his species. Were it otherwise, your roundabout accusation that Techtron is enslaving people and forcing them to work might apply. It doesn’t.”

“What of the guilds?”

“Techtron does not discourage guild membership. Our employees are free to make their own choices.”

“You don’t discourage it, but neither do you encourage it.”

David smiled. That was true, but the guilds had not ceased trying to force him to make guild membership a condition of employment at Techtron. There was no possibility of that. A growing number of employees were non-human and therefore unable to join one.

“No that’s true... was that a question?”

Sue shook her head slightly. “An observation. I doubt you’re making many friends among the guilds with your experiment, Mr. Lephmann.”

He shrugged before he could stop the movement and cursed silently. He didn’t want to appear uncaring. “Non-human integration into our workforce is not an experiment, Sue. It’s policy. As for the guilds, they do not accept non-human members. Although I would welcome a change in their stance, I don’t see that happening soon. So no, you’re right; I have no friends among them. Guild cooperation aside, hiring non-humans has proven very profitable for us. Techtron’s current share price is a reflection of that. Other companies have taken a keen interest in what we are doing, and some—particularly those in the security industry—are following suit.”

Sue smiled and inclined her head slightly, acknowledging his victory. “Let’s turn our attention to the current situation—a non-human serial killer loose in the city. What have you to

say regarding Professor Goddard's words earlier today?"

Sue had finally returned to the list of questions Channel 5 had supplied to David when they asked him to appear on the show. He breathed a silent sigh of relief and turned his thoughts back to the answers he had prepared.

"Unfortunately, Ian Goddard and organizations such as AML will see those like me dead by the millions."

"Why?"

"A minority of my people have foolishly abused society's trust, and as a result AML has gained ground in its vendetta against non-humans. For years now, Mr. Newman has been recruiting men and women from all walks of life with a single purpose in mind—eradicating people like me." David stared into the camera's lens, and it obligingly zoomed in upon his face. "Please, *please*... don't let it happen."

"And on that note, here's a word from our sponsor," Sue said with a pleasant smile.

The commercial came on.

\* \* \*

Chris awoke feeling rested and alert. Not a bad thing, but for her it was unusual. She often joked that she could hibernate like a bear, never waking despite noise, and found early mornings a trial. This morning was different somehow. She felt hyper-alert and full of beans. She could hardly wait to get onto the streets and start catching bad guys.

She was about to climb out of bed and get dressed when everything began to go wrong. There was a needle in her arm. She stared at it in surprise. There was a clear plastic tube attached to the needle, feeding a colorless liquid into her arm.

*IV?*

She followed the tube up to a stand holding a bag full of clear liquid next to the bed. She looked around the room. It was bright and cheerful but sterile. There was nothing to help

her with why she was here, but she had visited enough victims in hospital to recognize a private room.

"Shit," she whispered. What was she doing here, why couldn't she remember?

A pulse-monitoring sensor clamped her index finger and more wires disappeared under the covers. She took a peek expecting nasty injuries, but everything seemed fine. She inventoried her room again, looking for something that would explain her presence, but she found nothing to help her. It was a hospital room like any other. She was thinking about seeking an explanation outside when the door opened to admit two people she knew from work.

"Hi guys, looking for me?" she asked cheerfully. She could finally get some answers. Her smile slipped when the gloom on their faces registered. "What?"

"We have a few questions, Chris," Jimmy said for both of them. Baxter stayed quiet, looking uncomfortable.

"Shoot."

"What happened that night?" Baxter asked gruffly.

*At least he's his usual charming self.*

"Which night?"

"Don't mess me around. I'm not in the mood for your mouth. Give me what I need."

Normally she would have busted his chops for that, but she was in a good mood. She felt so full of energy she was surprised it wasn't crackling over her skin. Whatever the IV contained, she wanted the recipe!

"Be nice, Dave. I don't know which night you mean. And while we're on the subject of what I don't know; why am I in hospital?"

Baxter's face darkened, but Jimmy stepped into the breach—figuratively speaking. He remained near the door as if unwilling to come too close.

"Ease up, Dave. She doesn't know. Like the Doc said—"

Chris fiddled with the pulse sensor as she studied their faces. Something smelled off. They were acting strangely,

standoffish, and instead of asking how she was feeling like friends were supposed to do when visiting someone in hospital, they wanted to interrogate her.

“What don’t I know? What’s going on?”

“That right?” Baxter asked, ignoring her question. “You don’t remember?”

“Remember what dammit? You know why I’m in here. So tell me.”

“Can’t do it, Chris,” Jimmy said. “Orders.”

“Orders? Cappy said—”

“Not him, the Doc.”

“The Doctors said not to tell me? I feel okay, no broken bones, no holes, what gives?”

“We’re wasting time,” Baxter said tightly. “Your case is big news; Cappy is under pressure to wrap it up quick. That means he’s ragging my arse. I don’t like that.”

“I’m a case?” she said, frantically trying to remember something that would shed light on *her case*. That she was a case worried her. What was it about?

“If she says she doesn’t remember, then she doesn’t,” Jimmy said to Baxter. “We should be looking at the scene and talking to the witnesses. We might learn something that will lead us to Ryder.”

*Ryder?*

“What scene, where is—”

“The hell we will,” Baxter said ignoring her. He was acting as if she didn’t exist, or didn’t matter. Maybe both. “This case is deader than a vamp.” He stormed out the door without a backward look.

Jimmy smiled sadly. “Don’t think too badly of him, Chris. It’s hard for him seeing you like this. For me too. The Doc said you wouldn’t remember anything, but Cappy insisted we ask in case he was wrong.” He shrugged uncomfortably. “See you around, Chris. I wish... sorry about... sorry.”

Jimmy left.

“Sorry for what?” Chris said to the empty room.

She threw back the covers and examined herself more thoroughly, but she found nothing wrong. Under her gown she was butt-naked, but that didn't matter, what did was the sight of her body free of damage.

Chris blushed as another man entered her room without knocking. *What is this, Grand Central Station?*

"Lieutenant Humber?" the man asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

She hurriedly pulled the covers up to her chin. "Yes..." she said, finally noticing the white coat. "Doctor...?" She felt better knowing he was a Doc. He had probably seen worse hundreds of times.

"Brauer."

"Am I dying or something, Doctor Brauer?"

His jaw dropped. "No of course not."

"If I'm not dying, Doc, why are you standing over there like you're waiting to sign the death certificate?"

He grinned and took a step forward, but then he stopped again as if realizing he was doing something he shouldn't. "Do I really look like that?"

"You really do."

"You've seen it I suppose."

"Too many times. Come in, take the load off," she said patting the bed.

"I can't do that I'm afraid."

"No? Why not?"

Brauer looked around the room for inspiration. Chris watched him and tried to figure out what he was thinking. She couldn't begin to guess.

"What's the last thing you remember, Lieutenant?"

"Call me Chris, Doc. Everyone does."

"The last thing?" he asked intently.

What was his problem? "The last thing? I was... running?"

"Were you?"

She frowned. She couldn't recall why she was here. She

was uninjured—she wasn't hurt in any way that she could detect. She concentrated, trying to bring something forward. Nothing came to her but the smell of her own sweat—no, it was Brauer's. She could tell the difference. He was terrified of her.

"Why are you sweating, Doc?"

"It's hot."

"No." It was comfortable, just right in fact.

"Do you remember what happened?"

Did she? She said earlier that she remembered running. Was that right? "I was... chasing someone?"

He nodded.

"A perp?"

"Yes."

"Did I catch him?"

"Did you?"

"Cut the bull, Doc!" she said, suddenly furious at his evasions.

Brauer backed up and pressed himself against the door. "He caught you."

The anger fled as fast as it had come. "Oh."

That made sense now that she thought about it. She was the one in the hospital not the perp. Jimmy had mentioned someone named Ryder, but she didn't know that name. Why couldn't she remember?

"He shoot me, or what?"

Brauer licked his lips. Fear rolled off him in waves almost smothering her. Goddess! What in the nine hells was going on?

"He nearly killed you."

"Did he?" she asked as calm as could be.

The relief she felt at still being alive was overwhelming in its intensity. Energy crackled through her—life itself, vitality—call it what she would. She was alive, and *boy* did her body know it; she felt horny as hell.

"How long ago?"

That fazed him. "What?"

"How long ago was I injured?"

Brauer's eyes darkened. "They brought you in three nights ago."

"No." That couldn't be right. She would still have bandages and nasty bullet holes.

"I assure you—"

"What about my injuries?"

"What about them?" he asked warily.

"Where the hell are they?" The fear smell intensified and with it her own fear. "Spit it out, I can take it."

Brauer hesitated and she thought he might leave, but he stopped himself with only a half step to give him away. "You were attacked by a shifter."

*Lord and Lady not that... please no!*

She stared at him and kept staring. A shifter. A shifter had attacked her, but that didn't mean... did it?

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you, Doc. You said I nearly died. I've got it, haven't I?"

"We believe so," Brauer said solemnly.

Chris nodded. No wonder he was frightened. A shifter had attacked her. A shifter. Oh, Goddess let this not be happening. She would wake up and find it was all a nightmare. She squeezed her eyes shut, but when she opened them, Brauer was still there watching her.

"My partner, he's dead isn't he?"

Brauer shook his head. "He's fine, he wasn't with you."

She blinked hardly able to understand him. Ken hadn't been with her. Why not? Where the hell was he when that animal destroyed her life? Where was he when... She took a deep shuddering breath, and let it out, another and she felt calm slowly returning.

"When can I get out of here?"

"It's not that easy. We have you on fluoperazine-triphosphate. It's the only thing we have to suppress the

change, but you can't stay on it forever."

"Tranquillizer," she said, recognizing part of the name.

No wonder she felt so calm. She knew quite a bit about drugs. She saw all kinds of weirdness on the streets. Drug abuse was one of the least weird. The IV made it so she could take anything, even the news that she was screwed for life. If it weren't for the needle in her arm, she would smash everything in sight. She wasn't sure that she could stop herself if she got started.

"Same group as major tranquilizers," Brauer agreed not noticing her introspection. "Fluoperazine-triphosphate only has the one use. It's a dangerous drug for a couple of reasons, but so are..."

Shifters. So are shifters. That's what he had been going to say. She fiddled with the IV making Brauer nervous. She considered ripping it out and letting her anger take her. It would be so easy to let it go.

**Do it.**

She almost jumped out of her skin. Pull out the needle and do what, change into a poodle? It would be just her luck. A werepoodle! She laughed. She laughed so hard it hurt, and then she laughed some more. Brauer bolted. The door slammed shut behind him. That made her laugh harder than ever. She didn't notice when the laughter turned to tears. She sobbed her heart out and then—then the rage came. Pure rage. Hot fury. A shifter had turned her into an animal. She had to find him, so she could turn him into dog meat.

*Poodle meat.*

She screamed in laughter.

\* \* \*

## **An Offer**

“And that’s all for this week. I’m Susan Ash.”

“And I’m Pete Travin.”

They held the smiles for the camera. After a count of three, they both relaxed and let their shoulders slump. They were off the air. They dropped the smiles and gathered up a few items, notes mostly, and left the set. Camera operators finished up and the stagehands moved in to arrange the set for a different show due to air live in the morning.

As the first lycanthrope to come on the show, David had felt an obligation to remain on hand, but he hadn’t been needed. Susan came to join him and he put on his professional smile for her.

“David,” she said hesitantly. “I’m glad you waited. Are you busy tonight?”

Not another seeker! Goddess, they made him want to gag. How many really wanted him, really wanted what he could give them? None. They wanted the sense of danger. They wanted to be able to shock their friends and tell dirty stories about how they had screwed a shifter in the Change. If it ever happened, they would be in no condition to talk—or breathe for that matter.

“Dearest Susan, I dare not go with you. How should I control myself? With one such as you, I would have no chance.”

Wasn’t that the truth! He would rather kill her than take her to his bed, but she took his words the way he had intended.

Susan blushed. “I understand, David. It’s for the best we not get involved.”

David watched her go and allowed the smile to slip.

“That was well done.”

He pivoted on the spot, warily watching Geoffrey approach. “I don’t kiss on first dates.”

“You don’t date,” Geoffrey said, still smiling.

“Your point?”

“Just an observation.”

“The hell it was.”

Geoffrey laughed. “You know, even I’m surprised at how far you’ve managed to go.”

“You shouldn’t be. You know me better than most.”

“True. Are you going to take her under your wing like you did me?”

“Who, Susan?”

Geoffrey’s eyes glittered. His power rolled off him and over everyone nearby. The stagehands rubbed their arms as short hairs stood to attention.

David narrowed his eyes and refused to be moved. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“I can still stop you, Geoffrey. Don’t make me. Please, not here.”

“I don’t—”

He released his own Presence—the powerful essence of a pack alpha. Geoffrey’s eyes widened at the sudden rush and he stepped back. He bared his teeth in a silent snarl of anger and lashed out. David blinked in surprise at the strength of the push.

"Don't, Geoffrey. Don't push."

"You don't own me, David."

David glanced around to see if anyone had noticed what was happening, but so far they hadn't done more than rub chilled arms.

"Please. I don't want to do this. Not here."

"Shame," Geoffrey said, and allowed his power to roar out.

David stood in the centre of the storm. His skin crawled as if a million invisible ants ran over him. Geoffrey's scent suddenly flowed everywhere around him. He gasped and panted as if unable to get enough air—he was drowning in Geoffrey's Presence.

Mist—his beast—stirred. They were under attack... under attack by an alpha male younger and weaker than they were. That's all Mist knew or cared about. David was suddenly under siege from within as well as without. Muscles writhed and burned as Mist tried to trigger the Change, tried to claw his way to freedom. David dared not let him out, he dare not. Not here.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and slammed Geoffrey with everything in him.

Geoffrey staggered back and crumpled to one knee. What he felt David could only guess. Alpha he might be, but Geoffrey was still the weaker. The attack had felt like drowning to David, but to Geoffrey? By the look on his face, it felt like being burned alive. The muscles of Geoffrey's neck corded as he writhed in pain. He screamed in silence, he had no air with which to voice his pain.

Afraid someone would see, David reined in his power and stepped forward to help Geoffrey up, but he needn't have worried. The stagehands had already found other places to be. None would know why, but at times like these, a human's subconscious knew elsewhere was a fine place to be. It would instinctively take them there.

"Are you all right?"

“Don’t touch me!” Geoffrey gasped, still shuddering violently.

“I’m not touching you, all right?”

Geoffrey forced himself unsteadily back to his feet. He pulled his Presence in so tight, he could have passed for human before an entire pack.

“I’m sorry. I can’t let you hurt what I’m trying to do here.”

Geoffrey wiped sweat from his face with a shaking hand. “We’re not human. When will you admit we can’t live like them?”

“I know we’re not, but does that mean we have to live like animals?”

Geoffrey shook his head wearily. He stood quietly with his hands tucked into his armpits and hugged himself—radiating hurt.

“Come on,” David said trying to sound cheerful. “You’re here now. You might as well join us.”

“Where are we going?”

“Like you said before, I have a broken wing to mend.”

Geoffrey fell into step beside David. “The hospital?”

“You said it yourself. I have to take her under my wing.”

“Goddess...” Geoffrey breathed in sympathy for the Society’s newest recruit. They stepped out of the studio together and made their way to the car. “Do you know who did it?”

“Not yet, but I will.”

Geoffrey thought about that for a minute.

The others were waiting for them in the car. David didn’t know how Geoffrey had come to be at the studio, but it didn’t matter. He could send someone to pick up his car—if car there was.

David climbed into the back but Geoffrey hesitated. He leaned head and shoulders inside. “You don’t know who. Do you know what?”

“No.”

"Goddess..." Geoffrey breathed and sat opposite David behind the driver. "Let me do it."

"Not like you are."

"I'm fine."

David stared at him in silence. Ronnie started the car and pulled out of the station's parking lot.

"All right," Geoffrey said. "I'm not fine, but I can handle one little girl."

"*We* can handle one little girl. You I don't know about."

Geoffrey opened his mouth to protest, but then he thought better of it. He was learning.

Traffic was heavy. A shooting outside a car dealership caused the traffic to back up when rubberneckers slowed their vehicles to gawp at the victims and blood splashed over the sidewalk. Ronnie played a beat on the steering wheel impatiently. The scent of blood was heavy in the air, and it was having its effect on all of them, but she kept herself under control. That was good. Her furry side couldn't drive.

David snorted as he imagined Callia sitting up front with her tongue hanging out grinning at passers-by. Geoffrey's puzzled face darkened in anger.

"Don't be so touchy, Geoffrey. Not every smile or thought I have is about you."

"No?"

"I was thinking that Ronnie is remaining remarkably calm, and that it was a good thing because Callia can't drive. Satisfied?"

"Oh... sorry."

"Try not to be so sensitive. I know it can be hard sometimes."

Geoffrey lapsed into silence.

"Hey, Boss," Lawrence said from his place next to Ronnie. "The Prof came on pretty strong didn't he?"

"You saw the broadcast?"

"Yeah. You want me to pay him a visit?"

"Absolutely not!" David cried in alarm. "I want you to put

the word out that he's off limits. No one is to go near him. We can't afford being branded as out of control animals, especially not now."

"We already are," Geoffrey said sullenly.

He ignored that. "We have to keep everything quiet. Whoever did the cop will answer to me for it, but not in public, and certainly not anywhere that might jeopardize the coming vote on the amendments."

"You don't really think it will matter do you?" Geoffrey asked. "Humans see what they want to see."

"I know that, but this will give us rights we can build on. Besides, we aren't the only ones involved. I don't know about you, but I don't want to piss off the elves."

"Yeah," Ronnie said. "And what about them little guys?"

"Dwarves don't care one way or the other as long as they're left alone," David said, "but what about Stephen? The vamps love President Mitchell, and he's backing the changes. Under the new laws, slaying a vampire would be murder."

"I knew this country was messed up," Ronnie said with a grin.

David stared out the window as they passed the crime scene, not really seeing the blood, but his beast saw it all right. He could almost taste it.

"Put some music on, would you?"

Ronnie nodded and music filled the car. David listened intently and Mist subsided. It always worked for him. In his case, music really did soothe the savage beast. He watched the city rolling by and concentrated on feeling the peace flowing from the speakers.

Mercy Hospital hadn't changed much from his time here except in one respect. Not many hospitals had an army of reporters encamped at its doors. Uniformed police made an ominous sight in their all-black uniforms and body armour. They were here to keep order, and for a wonder, they seemed to be doing their jobs. With their hands casually hanging

beside their weapons, and their heads constantly in motion looking for threat, the officers surveyed the crowds with anonymous faces safely hidden behind visored helmets. The crowds knew to keep their distance. No one wanted to feel the pain an expertly handled shock-lance could inflict. A reporter would be foolhardy indeed to cause trouble here.

David looked upon the police as unavoidable obstacles, but it was hard sometimes. All he could reasonably expect to do was work around them. Working with them had proven impossible. How many times had he attended funerals knowing the police had made the funeral necessary? How many times had he been on the receiving end of those shock-lances so casually carried on hips?

"What a circus," Lawrence said as they climbed out of the car.

"Everyone keeps their temper in check. No excuses," David warned. "I don't want to see one hair of your furry sides where that lot can see."

They all knew what was at stake and didn't argue. Not even Geoffrey. The four of them walked through the army of reporters without stopping. Questions were shouted; some David would like to have answered, but not today. The new recruit was more important than satisfying a journalist's curiosity. The police stilled their survey of the crowd the instant they recognized what had come calling. David could feel their intense stares. It was a relief when all they did was watch them enter the hospital.

The security checkpoint came and went without difficulty. Security knew him and Lawrence. They visited often—too often. David nodded to Bill behind the desk, but he wasn't surprised when he received a blank-eyed stare in return. Bill was a friend to the Society, but expecting him to admit it where others could see was unrealistic.

They proceeded toward Isolation. They need not ask the way. Indeed, all but Ronnie was born again in this hospital. Born again furry. Better than saying ripped to shreds and

awakening whole, David had always thought.

Coming to the hospital always brought back the memory of his attack. A bitch—a female shifter—had attacked him one night and changed his life forever. He awoke in hospital feeling rather horny a few days later. His beast caused it of course, but he did not know that then. Andrew explained that he had been reborn a new man that night. Even then, David knew his friend was wrong. He wasn't a new man. He wasn't a man at all anymore. He was a disease—a very infectious and dangerous disease. He had tried to regain his old life after the attack, but he was destined to fail. Luckily, fate took a hand when he found Ronnie. She showed him what he could do, what he was, and a new life had unfolded before him. He didn't miss his old one—much.

At the enquiries desk he asked for Doctor Brauer.

"I'll page him for you, sir."

"Thank you," he said and wandered over to the drinks machine. He bought himself and the others bottled water. None of them could stand the excuse for coffee these machines provided.

"Brauer again. You'd think he'd get tired of this line of work," Geoffrey said, and sipped water from his bottle.

"Hmmm." David smiled. "You know, I think he might secretly be a seeker."

Lawrence shook his head at the thought. "No way is Brauer a thrill-seeker. He just likes hopeless causes."

Geoffrey nodded up the corridor. "Talk of the devil."

"Good to see you again, David," Brauer said, hurrying to meet them with his hand outstretched.

David shook and made introductions. "You know Geoffrey and Lawrence of course. This is Ronnie. I've mentioned her, but I don't think you two have met."

Brauer stared. "I would remember."

"Andrew?" David said with a small smile. Ronnie affected most men like that.

"Oh yes, sorry. You've come for Christine."

"You did call me."

"I know, but I think I made a mistake with her."

"How so?"

"I told her what happened," Brauer said. He looked down trying to avoid David's eyes.

David glared hotly. Damn him! How could he be so stupid? He was supposed to leave things to them.

"I see. How did she take it?"

"She laughed."

"Laughed?"

"Hysterically," Brauer said.

That was a new one on David. Anger was common, rage of course followed. Despair always came last of all, but he had never heard of hilarity being part of the process.

"Can we see her?"

Brauer nodded. "I need your word you'll not hurt her."

"You have it of course. She's one of us now. We look after our own."

"She might not see it that way."

"Has she said anything?"

"Not in so many words. It's a feeling. She won't let this slide."

Of course she wouldn't. None of his people had let their attacker escape punishment. Making a new shifter was criminal. None of his pack would make a new recruit. It was a rule.

"Shall we?" David said.

"You want me inside?"

"It would be best, Andrew. She knows your face."

"All right," Brauer said. "She's in five."

Brauer led the way. David and Geoffrey entered right behind him leaving Ronnie and Lawrence to bring up the rear. Once inside, Ronnie held the door in case Chris bolted, and Lawrence covered the window.

"—to see you," Brauer was saying. "They're here to help."

"Get out," Chris said harshly.

"I think you—"

"Let me introduce myself, Andrew," David said, stepping forward. "Perhaps she will see reason."

"Very well," Brauer said and moved aside.

"Who the hell are you?" Chris snarled.

"David Lephmann. I'm president of NSPCL. This is Geoffrey, that's Ronnie, and my big friend by the window is Lawrence."

"I know you," Chris said with narrowed eyes. "Where do I know you from?"

"As I said, I'm head of NSPCL. You must have seen my picture in the papers. I'm here to help you."

"I don't need help."

"Yes you do. That crap in your arm won't save you forever. You have to confront it and learn to control it."

"If I don't?"

"Then it will control you."

Chris glared. "Nothing controls me. Not even my captain."

"It will. I want you to come with us for a short while."

"Where?"

"A place we call Sanctuary. You need to learn some things quickly before you mess up your life for good."

Chris laughed bitterly. "You don't think its already messed up?"

"Not yet. The old Chris is dead; she died in a dirty alley. The new one is like a blank page. It's time to start a new chapter."

"Very poetic," she sneered. "I'm not going anywhere with shifters. One of you did this to me. *Infected* me. When I find him I'll—"

"We know what you will do," he said hastily. "We've all been through it. Doctor Brauer, however, is not one of us. He doesn't need to hear the details—*Lieutenant*."

Chris' face blanked; all emotion had fled. It would have

been unnerving if he hadn't seen it on so many of his people's faces.

"What does she say?"

"What?"

He smiled encouragement. "Your beast. What does she say?"

Chris looked uneasy. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Yes you do. Your beast speaks to you in the silence of your mind."

He smiled remembering his own shock when Mist first spoke to him. He had believed he was going mad at first, but then he realized it was too late for that. The duality was part of being a shifter. None of his people were sane by human standards.

"You will hear her better after the first Change."

"You're crazy," Chris whispered then screamed, "*You're crazy!*"

"We all are," Geoffrey said happily.

"Get them out of here!"

Brauer hesitated but then shook his head. "I'm sorry. You really do need David's help. Really."

"I don't want you and don't need you," Chris snarled. "Get out!"

David shook his head. "Andrew, if you would leave us?"

Brauer looked startled and uncertain. "I... yes, yes of course." He hurriedly left the room.

The moment the door closed behind him, everyone turned to study Chris intently. She shifted uncomfortably under their eyes, knuckles whitening as her grip upon the bedcovers tightened.

David smiled. "Do you feel horny?"

"*What?*" Chris yelped.

"It's a simple question," he said, fighting not to laugh. "Don't worry that I want to jump your bones. Just answer the question. Do you feel horny?"

“No.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not—”

“Chris...” he sighed deeply, “have you had no training? No of course you haven’t, the police are very lax on the subject aren’t they?”

Chris’ eyes narrowed at the slight. “What subject?”

“Non-humans of course. Take my word that I can smell a lie as well as I can smell your current condition. Do you need help dressing? Ronnie will help you.”

“I don’t need help. I need to...”

“Go on.”

“I’m not injured. More magic?”

He knew what she had been going to say. She needed to hunt down the one responsible. He sympathized with her, but she needed to learn a few things before she would be fit to walk the streets.

“In a way,” he said answering her question. “It’s not magic such as the elder races or the Council uses. It’s part of you—part of what you are now. Think of it as a talent we all possess.”

“I don’t want it, *any of it!*”

He waited for her to calm down. New recruits all went through this stage. He ought to force her to come with him, but that sort of thing was always distasteful to him, no matter how necessary it had proven to be on occasion. If asked, Ronnie and the others would urge him to take Chris in hand here and now, but he didn’t want to do that. She would resist if he forced her.

“I’m not going with you,” Chris said, giving in to her fantasy that nothing would change. “I have a life and a job that means something to me. I’m not going with you.”

David shook his head slowly. She was in denial. That happened a lot in the beginning, but he had hoped for a different outcome for her. She had made the wrong decision, but his choices were clear; force her to come with him now

and make another enemy, or wait and hope that she would come to him before it was too late.

"I can't make you," he said, abruptly making the decision to wait. Geoffrey fidgeted, knowing he was lying.

"You're damn right you can't!" Chris said hotly.

"But I do urge you to reconsider." He stepped up to her bedside and offered his card. "Keep this. When you realize what you are and what it means, call this number day or night."

She stared at the card for a long moment then took it. She was careful not to touch his hand. "That's it? No advice?"

"My advice is to come with me now, but you won't take it. Will you?"

"No."

David turned away and opened the door. "Take care," he said over his shoulder and walked out as if the matter was of no consequence. It was hard, but he kept walking.

\* \* \*

"Take care."

Chris watched the others file out after Lephmann, but the woman stopped by the door.

"When it gets unbearable, remember us. We've all been through it."

"What?"

The woman walked out.

Chris lay quietly looking at the card. It was a simple thing, plain white with an acronym and link number in gold text. "NSPCL."

She looked around and located the buzzer. A single button press and a short wait later she was questioning Doctor Brauer.

"I can leave?"

Brauer nodded. "Apart from lycanthropy, there's nothing wrong with you."

"Nice touch," she said bitterly.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound unfeeling, but a case like yours... well, there's very little we can do."

"Lycanthropy—it's incurable right?"

"I'm afraid so. Research has come up dry on the subject. Gene therapy, drugs, magic... nothing works. There's nothing to treat you see."

"Nothing at all?"

"Healing spells used on shifters always fail. It's as if—according to your body at least—there's nothing wrong with you. I'm sorry, but you're just not human any longer." He shuffled his feet awkwardly, but then he brightened. "I *can* tell you one piece of good news—you're one hundred percent fit. That's easy for me. Lycanthropes are always a hundred percent fit—sometimes more."

Brauer's attempt at humor passed her by. She tried to take in her situation, but the monstrosity of it overwhelmed her. No longer human; just like that she was one of the monsters. How can something as fundamental as her humanity be gone? She couldn't think. She couldn't decide what to do.

"The IV?" she asked, finally fixating on something physical.

"I'll remove it for you."

"No, I meant the stuff stops the change."

Brauer nodded. "It's a short term thing."

"I'll need some to take with me."

"No."

"No?" If the stuff in the IV hadn't stopped her, she would have shouted the question. "What the hell do you mean no?"

"No, you can't have any. I'm sorry, but you've been on it for three nights and days. Your metabolism processes it very fast and your tolerance for it has already risen. It will seem to lose potency. After a week of constant use, it will have no effect. I can't waste the little I have here."

She didn't know what to do. If she couldn't rely upon drugs to keep her sane, what could she rely on? All she knew

about shifters was what she had learned on the street. Keeping them calm was key and not getting too close when questioning them. If she had to arrest one, she always called backup, but how did any of that help her now?

"What do I do, what can I expect?"

"Didn't David say?"

"I didn't give him time." She wished now that she'd asked more questions.

"Oh." Brauer shifted uncomfortably. "I always call him when I get—"

"A shifter?"

"I was going to say a case like this, but yes. When I get a case I'm unable to deal with, I call him. He usually handles this."

"Well he's not here, is he?"

"I could try to reach—"

"No!" she snapped. "I don't want shifters near me."

"That's understandable but very awkward. I can tell you that without the drug you will be able to shift your shape. You need David or someone like him. Believe me, you do."

The thought of turning into something else made her feel ill. She shook herself and concentrated on the here and now.

"What else is there?"

"Nothing."

"There must be something you can tell me."

Brauer shook his head. "That's it."

"That's all you *know*?" she asked in outrage. He was supposed to know about this stuff. She had been counting on it!

"I'm not a lycanthrope, Miss Humber. I don't know how they do it, or more importantly, how they stop from doing it. I only know what I've observed or picked up over the years. Lycanthropes are stronger and tougher than humans are. Their senses are heightened. They regenerate but are allergic to silver. Their metabolisms run at a higher rate. You've probably noticed that you have a temperature?"

“No I—”

“Well you have and you haven’t. One hundred and eight degrees is high and dangerous for a human, but for you it’s normal. Your temperature is part of the metabolic process. You will eat more. On a more personal note, the flab you’re carrying will be gone soon. No lycanthrope is fat; they burn energy too quickly.”

“This isn’t flab,” she said, stung by the observation. “I’ve always had love handles.”

Brauer didn’t laugh. “Love handles are the least of your worries now. I think you need to reconsider David’s offer.”

“No.”

“Then you’re on your own,” Brauer said with a sigh.

“That’s it?”

“I’ll sign the release papers now. You’re free to go,” he said and left.

She stared at the door in silence.

\* \* \*

## Accusations

“Are you awake, Chris?”

Chris rolled over to find her partner standing uncertainly in the door. He hadn’t shaved and his clothes were rumpled.

“Where have you been? You look like crap.”

“Thanks,” he said dryly. He stepped further into the room and let the door go. It clicked shut. “How are you?”

“You know?”

“Yeah.”

She sat up. “Where were you? Where were you when that thing got me? You’re my *partner*.”

“I was in the car, remember?”

Did she? She tried to force her memory back, and the image of something—a Dumpster?—flashed into her mind. There was something else... a flashlight lying discarded upon the ground. She shook her head when nothing else came back to her.

“I told you to wait, Chris, but you wouldn’t listen. You *never* listen! I called for backup, but by then you were down.”

Anger slowly began to burn inside. He made it sound like it was her fault! It wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t!

“You should have been there, Ken. You should have b-

backed m-me u-up.” Damn! She didn’t want to cry.

“I’m sorry,” Ken said, close to tears himself. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there, but the fact is you messed up, Chris. If I’d been there we would both be dead or...”

“Worse?” she said, anger building. “Isn’t that what you were about to say?”

He nodded.

“*Well it can’t get worse for me!*” she screamed in sudden fury.

Ken stepped back edging for the door.

She could smell his fear, and something snarled deep inside. Something was coming. Oh Lady, something monstrous was coming!

“Get out, Ken. Get out quick!”

“I don’t understand—”

“*Get the fuck out!*”

“I’m sorry,” Ken gasped and bolted out the door.

*Oh Lady, it’s coming.*

She could feel it rising within her, the beast—her beast—was coming. She ripped off the sensors attached to her body, ignoring the piercing howl of the alarms, and threw the bedclothes back. Her frightened eyes were locked on the bag of tranquilizer as she stood and reached for the tap. She twisted it full open.

“What in the nine hells are you *doing?*” a nurse shouted as she rushed in. “You’ll kill yourself!”

“It’s coming. Please help me,” Chris pleaded. “It’s coming.”

“Mother Goddess—” the nurse gasped and bolted out the door.

“Don’t go! Don’t leave me here with it.”

It was close. She gritted her teeth and prayed that it not come. She prayed and prayed, and forced it back down. It snarled and spat in fury at its imprisonment within her, but something held it back—the drug. She watched the half-empty bag with frightened eyes, willing it to work. Slowly,

agonizingly, the beast lost ground to the drug.

Sprawled across the bed, she blinked lazily up at the ceiling. She didn't remember lying down. Everything was quiet, inside and outside. Pretty colors floated by as the room spun about.

Darkness.

She awoke to find Brauer peering worriedly into her eyes.

"Something wrong... apart from the other thing I mean?"

"Tsk," he said with an irritated sigh. "You're a very lucky woman. You have no business breathing after what you pulled."

"It was coming."

"No doubt it was, but killing yourself isn't the way to deal with it."

"No?"

"No," he said firmly. "Feeling sorry for yourself is understandable, but it gets old quickly. You said something earlier about finding the one responsible for your condition. You'll not find him if you're dead. Will you?"

"I suppose not."

Brauer stepped back to let her up. She found her clothes in a drawer, but she knew immediately they weren't the ones she must have been wearing when they brought her in. She wondered where her work pants and jacket were. She always wore a variation of those while on the job. She shook out the jeans and polo-neck sweater—they were hers all right.

"Who brought these in?"

"A friend of yours I believe. Mark Grinely?"

Oh Lady, she had been so full of self-pity she hadn't considered Mark. He must be frantic. She would go to him. It was a surprise not to find him barging in, but a relief too. She needed to get her own head straight before she could ease his mind. Her eyes prickled. What was she going to do?

"Does he know about me?"

“I didn’t tell him, but yes, he knows. Everyone knows.”

Everyone, what did that mean? “If I could be alone for a minute?”

Brauer nodded. “Certainly. I’ll be right outside.”

The door clicked shut behind Bauer and Chris dressed quickly in the clothes Mark brought. The jeans felt rough on her skin and they were looser than they should be. She remembered Brauer’s crack about her flab. It had started, just as he said it would. She wadded up the gown and threw it hard against the wall.

She took a deep breath and stepped outside into chaos. Nurses and other hospital staff rushed back and forth, trolleys rattled and crashed on their way to Goddess knew where, and the hum of voices filled the place.

“What’s going on?”

“Oh this is typical for Monday,” Brauer said, nodding at the rushing bodies. “I have your release here.” He offered her an official-looking document. “And here we have your badge and other things.”

She took the paper bag and looked inside. There was her dad’s old wallet that she used on the job. It had a couple of hundred dollars in it, but she ignored the bills to look at the snap of her parents. She needed to call them. Along with her badge, and ID, there was a clean hanky—because Mama always said you never know when you might need one—and her shoulder holster was here but...

“Where’s my gun?”

“The police have it.”

Yes, they would take it. She couldn’t remember doing it, but it was a sure bet she had fired her weapon. CSU would want it to match any rounds they found at the scene... wherever that was.

“Thanks for this.”

“I wish I could do more,” Brauer said.

“So do I,” she said glumly. “You have my insurance details?”

He smiled. "Don't concern yourself with any of that. Your department footed the bill."

"Oh."

That was a surprise, but a pleasant one. The Department didn't usually have the resources for that kind of thing. Hell, it didn't have the resources to police the streets effectively, let alone provide medical cover for its officers. Her insurance wasn't that extensive and...

She was putting off leaving.

"I better go."

Brauer nodded. "There's a cab waiting, and before you ask, it's on the house."

"You shouldn't have."

"I didn't. It really is on the house," he said, looking around meaningfully.

"Ah."

She didn't like taking charity, but seeing as the hospital didn't know about it, she would let it go this once. She followed the signs past the security checkpoint, and out through reception, but when she saw the crowd outside held back by uniforms, she balked at going further. She couldn't go out there, she just couldn't. Why hadn't Brauer mentioned this? Was this what he meant when he said everyone knew about her? Oh Lady, Mama would be frantic! She had to find a link booth. Looking around, she didn't spot one, but she did spot a familiar face.

"Why are you still here?" she asked, marching straight up to one of Lephmann's men.

"Hello to you too. I'm your taxi," Lawrence said.

"Like hell!"

He cocked his head at the crowd outside. "You don't want to walk out through that do you?"

*Damn!* "How do we go?"

"Follow me."

She followed.

It was obvious he knew his way around the place. Not

once did he hesitate at a corridor. She was lost in moments even after catching glimpses of the signs. X-ray this, and hematology that, they said. They might as well be Greek to her. Finally, they emerged into sunlight and she knew where she was.

Lawrence opened the back doors of the ambulance. "Get in."

"You had better not be stealing this," she warned.

"The driver is a friend of mine."

"Oh." She had assumed he was going to drive.

She climbed inside and sat in the med tech's position. Lawrence shut the doors, a moment later the ambulance pulled away. Five minutes went by before the doors opened again. Lawrence motioned her out and she jumped down to find the taxi waiting for her that Brauer mentioned. She recognized the street. They were still in Monster Central, a couple of blocks from the hospital.

"Thanks, Harry," Lawrence said through the ambulance driver's open window.

"Glad to do it man. You take care now."

Harry drove off.

"You coming?" Lawrence asked, and climbed into the back of the cab.

"Yeah."

They rode in silence for a time. She was sitting next to a shifter, and he smelled damned good—kind of like roasting chestnuts. She hated it, hated it, *hated it...* but he did smell nice.

"What cologne are you wearing?"

Lawrence smiled crookedly. "I don't wear cologne. None of us do."

"But you—"

"Smell?"

"Yeah, you do," she said, suddenly feeling flustered. "I mean it's nice... kind of."

"It's Farris."

"What?"

"The scent. It's my beast—Farris."

She blinked.

"You'll get used to the strangeness in time."

She couldn't imagine that. "He send you?"

"David?"

"Yeah."

"He's my boss."

"Your boss. That all he is?"

Lawrence shook his head. "He's president of NSPCL. He's alpha for my pack, he's my friend, he's your friend, he's alpha at Sanctuary. He leads."

"Quite a mouthful."

"You asked."

So she had. "What's alpha?"

"The strongest in the pack."

"That's it? He leads and all the rest of that stuff because he's strongest?"

Lawrence nodded.

"You're bigger than he is."

"Size has nothing to do with it."

"What does then?"

Lawrence wouldn't answer and no amount of badgering would work. She fumed in silence and watched the world go by outside. Everything was different now. She watched the people going about their routine, and hated them for their normality. When the cab pulled up outside her place, it looked the same as it always had, but she saw it through changed eyes. She had been happy here, but now...

"Here we are, delivered safely to your door. I'd bolt it if I were you."

She stared at him. "Would you?"

"Those reporters won't like you skipping out."

"Screw 'em," she snarled.

"*That* is why you need to bolt the door. Anger calls the beast."

A chill ran down her spine at the reminder. "I'll remember that."

"Do."

She climbed out of the cab half-expecting Lawrence to follow, but he didn't. Instead, he leaned forward and spoke to the driver. A moment later, the cab was gone.

The street felt abandoned. Most of her neighbors worked days and it was only late morning. She was glad of the quiet, glad to be home, but the empty driveway told her Mark wasn't in. Her own car must still be at Central waiting for her. She entered the empty house, and locked the door as Lawrence had advised. Mark was out, but he always carried his key, so that was no problem. On the dining room table she found a white envelope leaning against her vase of silk flowers. She opened it and read the three sentences written there in Mark's hand. She dropped it and ran into the bedroom. She yanked open all the drawers.

Empty.

The wardrobe door swung open to reveal empty hangars. The tie she had bought him last birthday lay discarded in one corner. She smoothed the material in her hands, delighted with the feel of the silk even as anger roiled within her. She slumped onto the bed fiddling with the ends of the tie. He had loved it, but a year later it lay discarded, just as she was. She tied it loosely around her neck and gazed at herself in the full-length mirror of the wardrobe. Just like that, Mark was gone. He didn't even have the decency to tell her face-to-face. A damn letter, not even that, a note!

I'm sorry, it said. I can't handle it, it said. I'm leaving, it said.

"What about me? I can't handle it," she whispered.

That might be true, but she had no choice but to try. Her eyes burned with the need to cry, but she wouldn't. The pain was too great for tears to solve it, not that they ever did. She rubbed her arms and hugged herself, holding tightly to the hurt. Not letting it out.

She wandered from room to room finding no distraction big enough to take her mind off what had happened. A bomb going off under the house wouldn't have been big enough to eclipse this. She had the disease, the plague, and Mark had left her. He didn't want to catch it. She didn't blame him... only she did. She needed him and he wasn't here.

The doorbell sounding was enough to make her leap into the air and come down facing that way. Goddess bless her for a fool... her heart was pounding like tribal drums. Her brain caught up and her breathing slowed.

Someone at the door—it might be Mark!

She ran to answer it ready to accept his apology. Words of greeting were on her lips as she pulled the door open.

"Lieutenant Humber, our viewers want to know your thoughts," Ed Davis said, shoving a microphone in her face. "What was it like being told you're now a shifter? Do you support the proposed amendments to the Constitution?"

Dozens of cameras flashed in her face, and people jostled forward thrusting more microphones at her. Questions battered her, flashguns flashed, and vid cameras recorded.

She shielded her eyes. "Get that thing out of my face before I make you eat it!" she snarled.

\* \* \*

## Bad News

Chris arrived at Central with ten minutes to spare for her second appointment with Doctor Carey. Carey was the psych automatically assigned to her after the attack. It was his fault that Cappy had ordered her to take three week's convalescence, all of which she spent in the prison her home became after the newsies lay siege outside.

*Damn the man!*

Three weeks was a lifetime in a murder case. Ryder's trail had gone stale while she languished at home, unable to leave without instigating a riot among the rabid microphone wielding newsies. In all that time, Ken was the only friend to visit, but even he wouldn't tell her how the case was going. Cappy had ordered him not to discuss details with her. She was both victim and witness. Telling her too much could jeopardize the case when it came to court. She didn't like it, but she understood.

Flint and her mysterious colleague, Agent Barrows, were running their own federal investigation. Barrows had chosen to visit her alone a couple of days after the hospital discharged her. Lucky for him, her short-term memory loss had reversed itself with a vengeance. Nightmares had disturbed her sleep

every night since her return home. Barrows had asked the questions she would have asked in his place, and a couple she wouldn't have thought of, but for all of that she didn't think he was any closer to tracking down Ryder than Ken was. Flint, like everyone else she knew, was avoiding her.

Her Dad was the only bright spot in her life.

After learning Mark had left her, she had packed her stuff and gone to visit her parents for a few days. The farm was exactly how she remembered it, not a good thing considering how hot to leave she had been when she was a kid. Mama had been teary-eyed and angry with her when Chris arrived, but Dad had smiled in welcome and hugged her as if nothing had changed. For him, nothing had. He said he didn't care that she was a shifter; he would love her no matter what. It was harder for Mama to accept, but Chris hoped she would in time.

The elevator doors opened, forcing her to focus on the present and put away thoughts of her parents. She stepped out of the elevator onto Central's fourth floor and strode resolutely to the reception desk.

"I have a ten o'clock with Carey."

The receptionist's smile seemed false, but her voice remained even. "Ah... let me check. If you would take a seat, it won't take a moment."

Chris nodded and chose the closest seat. There were a couple of magazines on it. She casually threw them atop another of the seats and sat watching the receptionist talking, one assumed, to Doctor Carey on the link.

"He's running a little late," the receptionist confided. "It will be a few more minutes."

Chris sighed and checked her watch. It was five after ten already. "Okay," she said, though it really wasn't. "I'll wait."

She would wait all day and night if she had to. She couldn't get back to work until Carey signed off on her. Regulations stated that an officer had to have a session with the psychs if she was injured in the line of duty, or when she discharged her weapon to injure or kill a perp. Doctor Nichols had held the

last few sessions she attended. She had been wounded a couple of times over the past twelve years, but then there was John's death and her run-in with Stanton.

Whenever she thought of her dead partner, she remembered Cappy handing her John's badge bound with a black ribbon after the funeral. She had kept it with her like a talisman for months after John's death, but when Cappy assigned Ken as her new partner, she had finally laid him to rest.

John's badge was displayed on a shelf at home now, next to a photo of him taken at one of the many barbeque-bear fests the guys still laid on from time to time. She wished she could picture him as he was in that photo—laughing with a smoking burger upraised on a pronged fork—but the image that always plagued her was of his last moments. She had been right there when he died. She would never forget the look of surprise on his face. His eyes had widened and he said...

"Chris?"

She jumped and looked up to find Cappy looking at her. "You startled me, Cappy. I was just thinking about John."

His eyes darkened and he nodded. "I'll never forget that night." He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "I need you in my office, Chris."

She stood, checking the time. It was half past ten! "My appointment was for ten, but Carey's running late again. I'll come up as soon as I..."

Cappy was shaking his head. "He won't see you today."

"But it was his office that made the appointment." She glared at the receptionist. "I'll find out what's going on and make a new one."

Cappy sighed. "He won't see you. It has to do with why I came down here. Let's go up to my office. It's more private."

She followed him to the elevator, but waited until they were inside and on their way up before trying to get some answers. She glanced at him as the elevator ascended. She could sense he was uneasy, and that darkened her mood. It could only be she that made him feel that way. What else

could it be? She was one of the monsters now, a shifter. No one with sense would feel easy being near one in a confined space like this, but it still hurt. Cappy was her boss, but he was more than that. They were friends as much as anything. If he felt like this about her, she doubted their friendship would survive. How it would affect their working relationship, she didn't know, but it was bound to put a strain on it.

"Can you give me a hint?" she asked when the silence became unbearable.

"Watson is in my office."

She made a face. "What does he want?"

Commander Watson was Cappy's immediate superior in rank, but he was in no way his superior in other ways. Watson might have the rank, but his rapid rise had more to do with politics than good police work. He was a very good friend of Chief Simpson and owed his position to him. It wasn't that he was an incompetent officer; he was simply an indifferent one, and that could be worse. Competence could be taught, but you had to care to learn the lessons. Watson cared about nothing except looking good in the media and making Simpson happy.

She suddenly had a horrible thought. "Please don't tell me he wants to hold a press conference. You know how I feel about that kind of thing, Cappy. If he makes me stand in front of the newsies and..."

"It's nothing like that."

"What then?"

The elevator chose that moment to arrive and the doors slid aside. Cappy stepped out of the elevator and looked grimly back at her. "I don't want to be the one to tell you, Chris. I'm sorry."

She shivered. "You're scaring me."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that!" She followed him toward his office.

People she knew stopped to stare. Ken was at his desk and looked up when she came by. He was going to stop her and

talk, but then he saw Cappy with her. Whatever he had been going to say was forgotten. Cappy opened the door to his office and ushered her inside.

Watson was sitting in Cappy's chair behind the desk when she entered. That was going too far! How dare he usurp Cappy's place... *and* he was making free with the stack of files on the desk! She glared, not noticing at first that Watson was not alone.

The sound of breathing made her turn to find its source. Another man sat unhappily next to one of Cappy's huge potted plants. She recognized him—Shawn Macklin. He was her Guild Rep and an old hand in the Department. He had backed her up on the streets a few times over the years, but he manned a desk now, and was close to retirement. She would always remember him as someone to rely on, but his presence usually meant she was in trouble.

"Hey, Mac, how goes it?"

"Hey, Chris, my feet are killing me," Mac grouched.

She smiled. "Your feet are always killing you."

"Yeah, life's a bitch. How you doing, kid?"

She glanced at Watson. He closed the file he had been reading, and added it to the pile already in danger of toppling off the desk.

"Seeing you sitting with him, I would say not too well. Am I right?"

Mac grimaced. "Yeah, I think you can safely say that."

Cappy sighed and took a seat. "You better sit down, Chris."

Whatever was going on, she knew she wasn't going to like it. Sitting down might be a good idea.

She took the last empty seat next to Cappy and tried not to fidget as the emotions in the room swamped her senses. She scented a profound weariness in Mac and underneath that a deep sadness. She knew Cappy was nervous, but he was also angry. Maybe it was Watson that made him feel that way. She couldn't be sure; she wasn't a mind reader. Watson though, was

terrified of her. It surprised her, because she hadn't known he was that good an actor. He looked completely at ease where he sat behind the dubious safety of Cappy's desk, but under that phony poker face he wore, he radiated terror. Goddess help her, she could taste his fear and liked it. She tensed as something stirred and rolled through her body in a wave of heat.

*Something? You know damn well what it is!*

She forced herself to cross her legs and sit back as if she had meetings like this every day. "What's going on?"

Watson interlocked his fingers and leaned on the desk. "There's no easy way to say this, so I'll just say it straight out. The Department has discussed your situation and has decided to retire you on medical grounds. You'll get full pension and benefits—"

Shock slammed through her. The roaring in her ears blotted out the rest of his obviously prepared speech. She shook her head and tried to rally her wits as the import of what he had said finally got through to her addled brain.

"You said medical grounds, but there's nothing *wrong* with me!"

"Chrissss," Cappy said her name like a sigh. "Don't make this harder than it has to be. Lycanthropy is a medical condition; it's a disease and infectious as hell. You *know* that."

"That's not the reason." She clenched her fists to stop herself pounding on him.

"It is."

"No it's not. You're worried I'll go furry and eat a suspect."

"That too," Cappy admitted. "I trust you, Chris. If you say you won't let it happen, then I believe you. But it's not my decision."

She forced herself to look at Watson without launching herself over the desk at him. He must have seen the struggle on her face because he paled. Absolute terror rolled off him

and swamped her in its intoxicating embrace.

She swallowed thickly, forcing away the howl she wanted to voice. "The Chief?"

"Higher," Watson mumbled.

*The mayor.* That utter bastard! He was busting her off the force just because... her shoulders slumped. He was pensioning her off because she wasn't human anymore. Right or wrong, all officers of the law were human. It had always been that way. She should have expected something like this. She should have seen it coming! Lord and Lady what was she going to do? Mark had left her; Mama hated her for letting Ryder turn her into an animal, and now this. Her work was all she had left, and they were going to take it away from her.

She turned to Mac desperately. "Is there anything the Guild can do?"

He shook his head. "If they had tried to cut you off, we would have busted their chops, but they didn't try that. They're offering a medical pension with full benefits. I hate to say it, Chris, but they're being more than fair."

"Of course it's fair," Watson said with a scowl. "Despite Guild propaganda to the contrary, we are not in the habit of screwing over our officers."

Mac snorted. "You know damn well what you're offering is the standard package for this kind of situation. We both know what kind of damage Chris could do to the Department if she ran crying to the media."

"I wouldn't do that!" she burst out. "I would never do anything to hurt the Department."

Watson nodded approvingly. "I'm glad to hear you say that. I deeply regret what happened to you, but I'm sure you agree that the Department's welfare is paramount. We've had six attacks on police officers this year—"

"Not here," she said.

"No, but state-wide we've had six. None of those infected officers has been allowed to return. God knows how many civilian attacks have gone unreported."

Chris swallowed a scream of despair. Her life was over. She had been on the inside long enough to know that non-humans never held positions in the Department. Never. She had never questioned it in all the years she had been on the force. She questioned now, but one person alone had no chance against the government. It was hopeless. She wasn't human, and she wasn't a police officer either—not anymore. They were cutting her loose, taking everything that lent meaning to her life.

"So that's it," she said dully. "Twelve years in the Department and now nothing."

Cappy nodded unhappily. "Yeah."

Watson pushed a sheaf of papers across the desk toward her and dropped a pen on top. "I need your signature on this; it's just to say that you agree to the terms of your separation from the Department. As soon as you sign, I can release your severance pay to your account."

She glanced at Mac.

He nodded sympathetically and she signed the papers without bothering to read them. It didn't matter now. Nothing did. She stood to leave, but there was one final indignity to go through.

"Your shield," Watson reminded her.

She took her badge out of its wallet and stared at it. Rather than give it to Watson, she gave it to Cappy. "Look after this for me."

Cappy nodded in silence.

Her stomach was rumbling in complaint when she left Central. She needed to eat, and she couldn't wait. It felt like she was always eating now. A burger and fries to tide her over until she got home would have to do. There was a place just down the street; they always used the best meat, and that was what she needed. She walked that way concentrating on food and not on the fact that her life was over.

She stepped inside, trying not to notice people edging aside from her. At the counter, the delicious smells made her

mouth water.

"I'll have two quarter pounders with everything on 'em, and double fries. Oh, and a Coke to go with it."

She pulled her Dad's old wallet out of her coat pocket, but the girl behind the counter did not ask for the money. She had backed off and was speaking urgently with an older man. They were looking her way. She tensed as the man came toward her.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. We don't serve your kind here."

"What?" she asked, hardly believing what he had just said. "You what?"

"Sorry, ma'am. I recognize you from the news. You're a shifter. There are laws—"

"You have to be kidding me," she said in amazement.

"No, ma'am." He watched in agitation as his customers hurried out the door. "You have to leave. The Food Safety Commission would close us down. We have a sign." He pointed to it.

Sure enough, there was a sign pasted to the door. She had never noticed it before. Had that been there all these years? It looked old.

*No dogs, cats, shifters, vamps, or ghouls allowed.*

She laughed uncertainly. "This is a joke, right?"

"I'll have to call the police if you don't leave."

"But I've eaten here for years."

"That was before."

"What would you do if I were a ghoul?"

"There are spells around the door to deal with that kind of thing. Now I must insist you leave." He was becoming less polite.

This wasn't happening. The staff behind the counter were whispering and smirking at her. The disgust on their faces was obvious. She felt dirty, unclean, as if their looks could somehow transform her into their sick imaginings. She reached for her badge...

*Oh yes, I forgot. Cappy has it.*

"But I'm hungry," she whispered, still in shock. Without her badge she had no protection or privilege. She was a civilian and vulnerable.

"We don't serve your kind here. There are places—less fussy places."

She felt anger building. She had to get out before she did something this man wouldn't live to regret. She turned and walked away clamping down on her temper. She had to think nice thoughts, happy thoughts. It was the only way to keep it down. Her vision blurred but she kept walking.

She had been walking aimlessly for quite some time, brooding over her situation with her stomach grumbling constantly, when she smelled food not far off. She smelled it clearly even over the stink of humanity that surrounded her—coated her. It was a hot dog stand.

"Two of your biggest with everything on 'em," she said salivating. She had to eat now!

"I know you. You're that shifter, ain't you?"

"No I—"

"Yes, you are. I've seen you on the news."

She looked around for an escape, but rather than making a fuss, the vendor began making her a pair of hot dogs. She stayed put and hoped. He was about fifty she would say, maybe a little more. He wore a dark coat with a scarf around his neck, muffling his mouth and chin. It wasn't that cold, but maybe he was one of those who felt it more.

"Damn shame the monsters got you. What're you going to do now?"

"I don't know." She couldn't believe she was discussing this with a complete stranger, but it felt oddly reassuring too. Ken and Agent Barrows had been her only contact with people for weeks. "Reporters offered me money."

"Yeah? You gonna take it?"

"Don't know."

He wagged a finger at her. "You make sure you get the money up front. Those people will use you up and throw you

away, girl.” He passed her the hot dogs and she ate one in seconds. “Phew! You sure are hungry. Here, have another on the house.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got money.” She pulled out her wallet and paid him. “These are delicious.”

“Glad you like ’em.”

“I do. I went for a burger just now, but they wouldn’t serve me. Can you believe that? We’re in America not China!”

He frowned at her oddly.

“What?”

“Where you been, girl?”

She finished her second hot dog. “I’ll have another two.”

“Suuure,” he drawled, and started making them.

“What did you mean where have I been?”

“I meant you have to be blind not to see what’s right in front of you. Ever seen a dwarf walking the street?”

She frowned. “No, but what—”

“You won’t neither, too dangerous for ’em. Have you ever heard of one living nearby? Ever seen one run for mayor? Ever seen an elf in the city? Ever seen anything non-human in authority of any kind whatsoever?”

“No, but what’s your point?”

he sighed. “My point is the only people treated with respect in America are humans. Hell, humans are the only people treated like *people* here.”

“But the dwarves live underground,” she protested. “They like it down there. Why would they come up here? And the elves have Underhill.”

He shook his head. “There’s none as blind as them who won’t see.”

She took the offered hot dogs and ate them while they were still hot. She held out her hand. “I’m Chris.”

He shook her hand and said, “Mathew.”

“Glad to know you, Mathew.”

“Likewise, Chris. Do me a favor and think about what I said, will you?”

"I'll think about it," she said, meaning the reporter's offer for her story.

The next day she began looking through the Want Ads for work. The reporters outside were still there, still offering outrageous sums of money, but none were willing to pay up front. When she started talking lawyers and contracts, they suddenly lost interest in paying for an exclusive. Funny that. It was as Mathew said; they wanted her to put out for them without them paying. If she was going to whore her story, and she was still in two minds about that, she wanted the money in her account first.

She went through the papers circling a few likely job prospects with a pen, but when she contacted them, she met resistance every step of the way.

"What do you mean, am I human," she said in outrage.

"It's a standard question we always ask," the woman on the other end of the line said. "Our insurance doesn't cover non-humans."

"I'm..." she couldn't say it, "I'm no longer interested." She broke the connection and moved to the next circled item. Security specialist it said, but the salary was a lot less. "I worked for twelve years with the police."

"Uniformed?"

"Detective."

"Excellent! You sound ideal, Miss Humber. What's your first name by the way? I can't keep calling you Miss all the time."

"Chris," she said and the line went dead. She punched in the number again. "Hello? Sorry, we were cut off."

"The position is open to humans only," the man said stiffly.

The line went dead again.

She tried the next number; and the next, and the next. She came across the same thing every time. As soon as they learned she was a shifter, they became belligerent and accused her of

wasting their time.

Finally, she tried the last number she had circled. It was a nightclub that she assumed needed security on the door. She could do it with her eyes closed, but didn't want to. All she wanted to be was a detective, but that was closed to her.

She punched in the number and waited for an answer. It took quite a while.

"Yeah?" a irritated sounding man said.

She took a deep breath. "I'm interested in the job you have advertised."

"Which one? We've got a couple of places need filling."

"Security—"

"Nah, sorry. That one's gone."

"Wait!" she cried desperately. "What's the other one?"

"Sorry, shifters only."

She blinked in surprise and sudden hope. "Say that again?"

"I said shifters only. Are you deaf?"

"No, but I am a... I am a shifter."

"Really? That's great! What's your furry side?"

"Why?" she asked warily.

"We have to get the costume sorted out."

"What costume?"

"For your dance routi—"

She threw her link across the room in a fit of temper. There was no way in hell she would be a dancer in a club. She would rather die! She heard quiet laughter, and spun toward the window, but no one was watching her from there. She frowned at the closed door, and then looked around the room for the source of the sound. It was only then that she realized it was her passenger. It was snickering in the back of her head. The damned fur ball thought it was funny! Her face heated and she shredded the newspapers in frustrated rage.

"We need the freaking money! Let's see how funny you think it is when we run out of meat! It doesn't grow on trees! You won't think its funny then will you, you rag-eared, flea

bitten, pain in the arse!”

The laughter in her head grew louder and louder until she was screaming and covering her ears trying to shut it out. But it was all in her head. She couldn't get away from it. She couldn't get away from what she was!

She jumped to her feet and kicked the coffee table out of her path. The glass top shattered into a million shards. The vase that Mark's mother bought them was the next casualty. It sailed through the air and smashed against the wall.

“Stop looking at me!” she screamed at the photographs on the mantel.

They were all laughing at her. Ken just looked disappointed, but Mark was grinning. He thought it was funny too! The bastard was laughing at her.

“Don't you laugh at me, don't you laugh!” She swept everything from the mantel onto the floor and stomped them where they lay.

The sudden pain in her belly doubled her over with a grunt.

She was panting in rage, but it suddenly turned to fear when she realized what was happening. Anger... she mustn't be angry. Lawrence said it triggered the Change. She held a hand up before her disbelieving eyes and watched it twist and ripple into a clawed monstrosity. It wasn't one thing or the other. She clutched her wrist with her still human looking left hand, as if doing so could stop the spread of the change. Fur slithered and spread up her arm despite the grip she maintained. The pain in her hand made her want to howl. Her passenger already was—in excitement.

**I'm coming.**

“Screw you!” she screamed. “I'm not letting you out!”

She ran into the bedroom and ripped open a drawer in the nightstand. She snatched up the gun with her left hand and raised it to her temple. The internal howling cut off as if with a knife, but she wasn't fooled; it was watching her, waiting for her to relax. She could feel it. Everyone watched and

whispered. She could hear them out there even now. Whisper, whisper, whisper... as if she couldn't hear them talking about her behind her back. She knew what their game was, oh yes, she knew all right. They were waiting for her to crack up. They wanted her to. It would push up their ratings.

She chuckled and thumbed the hammer back. "Not laughing now are you, flea brain?"

Her passenger watched in silence, biding its time.

\* \* \*

## **A Cry For Help**

Panting breath and burning lungs, pounding feet on pavement... the rank smell of fear on the air, and the taste of it in her mouth. Chris ran as if her life depended on it.

“It does, Lieutenant.”

She gasped. The voice was right behind her! She looked wildly back along the alley and found a pair of golden eyes glaring at her, seemingly hovering unsupported in the blackness. A wolf howled in the distance, and her heart thundered. She could barely hear her rasping breath over the blood pounding in her ears.

“Where is Flint?” Insane laughter battered her ears. “She and I go back a ways, did you know that? You should have brought her with you. Where is your backup, Lieutenant?”

She ducked around the corner into another alley, and dove headlong behind a Dumpster. Her panting breath was sure to give her away. She clamped a hand over her mouth and huddled in fear.

“Where is your backup, Lieutenant?” The words were like a sigh on the breeze. “Where is your backup, Lieutenant?”

She moaned in fear and huddled smaller. Hugging her knees to her chest, she tried to will herself to disappear. It

was coming... it was very close, very close. She could feel it. She shivered and her breath smoked; it hung around her head like mist. She peered around the Dumpster, but the alley was empty.

*Click... click... click...*

She froze; she knew that sound. It was the sound the claws of a dog made on pavement, but no dog made this sound. She whimpered when the monster stepped out of the darkness. It had the distorted head of a wolf and the torso of a man, and walked in an unnatural hunched forward stance. Its arms looked too long for its body, and it moved on legs unable to straighten fully. Lethal looking claws tipped long fingered hands... a horror out of a nightmare.

She reached for her gun, but it wasn't there. In panic, she reached for the Defender in the waistband of her jeans. She gasped in shock when she touched bare skin. She wasn't wearing jeans; she wasn't wearing anything! She was naked in a dark alley with a monster bearing down on her. She was defenseless.

"There you are," the monster said as he rounded the Dumpster.

She looked up into its eyes like a frightened child. "Please don't."

"Where is your backup, Lieutenant?" Ryder snarled and seized her with crushing jaws.

"Noooo!" Chris screamed and leapt out of her bed to land in a crouch in the corner of her bedroom.

She gasped for breath and shook. A dream... it was just a bad dream. She was safe now; she... a stinging pain on the side of her neck distracted her. She turned to the mirror on the wardrobe door.

She was bleeding.

She turned her head to survey the damage properly. The blood was flowing freely from four long cuts on her neck, and there were slashes in her t-shirt where they continued below

the neckline. The scent of blood was strong on the air as she pulled the shirt down. The cuts continued in a curving line over her collarbone. They stung like crazy, but they were shallow. The blood was mostly coming from her neck where the cuts started and were deeper. In her dream, Ryder had slashed her... she shook her head. She was awake now and the wound was real. She checked her hands and found the answer. There was blood and skin under her nails. She had acted out her dream and clawed herself.

"What the hell is going on with you, girl," she said to her reflection.

She stripped off the t-shirt and used it to mop blood. The claw marks were fading before her eyes. She watched as they retraced their path over her collarbone and up towards her neck, leaving unbroken skin behind. A minute later, there was no trace of any damage except for a faint smear of blood, and the ruined t-shirt she still held.

"Damn you, Ryder," she muttered. "Damn you to the ninth hell for eternity."

After showering and dressing in jeans and polo neck sweater, she threw away the ruined shirt. She wished she could throw out the dreams and memories with it.

It was still dark outside when she dropped the bloody shirt in the garbage, but that didn't deter her own personal brand of stalker. Barely had she replaced the lid on the garbage can, when blinding light flooded the back of her house. She snarled and raised a hand to shield her eyes. The lights arrayed along the top of the fence had done a good job of turning her backyard into a television studio.

The buzz of miniature rotors heralded the arrival of automated hover cams set to lock onto movement. She bent and groped for some ammunition while scanning the sky for a target. Her fingers closed around some pebbles, and she let fly the moment she saw the cameras. They didn't try to dodge as they usually did—more proof of their automation. Their crews were probably asleep in the vans that had taken

up permanent residence along her street. The shotgun effect of her pebbles worked like a charm on the rotors. She ducked as pieces of hover cam rained from the sky; she smiled grimly when she counted her kills.

"Humber four, newsies nil," she muttered and bent to retrieve her trophies.

Back inside with the door locked, she dropped the cameras next to the other shattered prizes of her personal war with the media. She had quite a nice collection now. The heap of broken technology was beginning to look like a macabre sculpture where it spilled across the kitchen floor.

She made herself a fresh pot of coffee and sat at the kitchen table to sip a cup or two. On the table were two piles of paper. One consisted of newspaper clippings; the other contained her notes and the original hard copy printouts of Baxter's work on the shifter slayings. Between the two, the blank screen of her portable computer stared at her accusingly.

"All right, already. I said I'd find him, I'm gonna find him!"

Something stirred and awoke to look out of her eyes. **We hunt now?**

Chris froze in shock. *No!*

**Not hunt?**

Her hands shook and coffee slopped out of her cup. She put it down and pushed it away. Lephmann's friend said... Geoffrey said all shifters were crazy. He had laughed it off afterward, but he had meant it. She knew it then and she knew it now. He had meant every word. Oh Goddess, she was hearing voices... her beast had a voice now. What was she going to do?

She blinked burning eyes, determined not to let the tears fall. If she didn't listen to it, if she pretended not to hear it, then maybe it would go away.

She reached for her cup again, but her hand was shaking so badly she feared she would drop it. She clenched her fist and willed it to be still. A deep breath, another, and the

tremors subsided. She smiled grimly and took a gulp of coffee. She wouldn't let fear take control of her life.

"No one controls me," she whispered, but there was doubt in her voice. She scowled. "No one. Not even you, flea brain." She cocked her head, listening for a comeback.

Silence was her answer.

She nodded in satisfaction and turned on her computer. The screen lit to show the last report she had been reviewing. It was a transcript of her interview with Sandy Hodges, but there was nothing in it to help her. She closed the file and opened another. This one began with an image of Vincent Fairman's corpse on the mortuary slab followed by Meckler's autopsy report. She reread it carefully, but as with all the other reports, nothing leapt out as being significant.

She cupped her chin in her hand, and leaned an elbow on the table. She sighed; this was going nowhere.

She knew the contents of all the reports by heart. There was nothing in them to help her find Ryder. Scrolling through the data with one hand, she wondered if Baxter and the others had learned anything new. Her information was weeks old, and she had no access to current data. She only had the backup copy of her files to work with. She wouldn't even have that if Cappy hadn't assigned her cases to Baxter when Flint joined the team. It was possible that Ken had learned something new in the weeks since her *retirement*; maybe even something she needed to connect the dots and find Ryder.

She sighed morosely. If only Ken hadn't taken Cappy's gag order so seriously, he might have helped her. If only DD had hacked into Flint's files for her... but she hadn't, and their last meeting had ended badly because of that refusal. Nothing was going right. She shouldn't have asked DD to do it, but she had, and now their friendship was maybe on the rocks. She wasn't sure and was afraid to ask. As for Ken, he wouldn't talk about any of his cases—none of them, not just her case. She could have helped him. She was a good cop... *had been* a good cop, and she still had all her contacts. No one had better

informants on the street than she did, but when she offered to help him, he had refused to consider it. She hadn't talked to him since and had a feeling he was avoiding her. Everyone was avoiding her these days. All her friends had melted away, but she missed those from the Department the most.

*Lady, I miss them so much!*

She took a deep breath past a sudden tightness in her chest. It didn't matter. That life was over. She had to rely on herself; there was nothing and no one else.

She poured another cup of coffee, and stood near the window watching the day lighten. She couldn't help feeling that she was missing something important. She turned away from the view of her backyard, and frowned at the clippings. Putting her cup aside, she picked up the top one. It was a news story about her attack. The media had tried to interview her many times, but she had refused to answer their questions. It hadn't stopped them from printing what they wanted.

As she read the mostly fictional account of her narrow escape from death, her thoughts flashed to Ed Davis. Ed was a slime she had dated for a while a couple years ago. She couldn't believe she had fallen for the fake persona he used on screen. Ken had warned her more than once, but back then, she wouldn't hear a word against him. Ed could be charming, but underneath the front he put up to fool the public into thinking he was a nice guy, there was nothing but a deep pit of ambition.

Ed had been just another reporter dogging her steps when she first met him. She had treated him like all the others, with disdain, but events took a bit of a twist, and Ed had been there when she needed him. The case had been one of murder as most of hers were, and the perp, one J.W. Rabley, had been keen on publicity. She never did learn why he chose Ed for his go-between, but he did, and it proved his undoing. Ed could have kept the secret and made good use of Rabley for his own gain, but instead he contacted her and together they had set a trap that eventually saw Rabley caught and executed. That had

been the beginning of their relationship, and was indirectly the root cause of their break up.

Being a reporter, Ed obviously took a keen interest in her cases, but her insistence on not compromising her rules where the media was concerned hampered his ambitions. She hadn't thought it much of a problem at the time. All couples had their little fights, but for Ed it was a big thing. He could not—or would not—see why giving him information was out of the question—especially as he had helped her with Rabley. He wouldn't listen to her explanations and became pushy. He even threatened to leave her if she didn't bend a little.

She had never taken well to threats; she told him to take a hike. To her surprise, he did. Ever since then, he seemed to show up whenever her name was linked to a case. He seemed to think it was part of his job to make her life harder... just like at the scene of Vincent's murder.

She frowned. "How did he get there so quickly?"

**We should kill him... he betrayed us.**

She stiffened, crumpling the clipping in her fist. She took a deep breath and carefully smoothed it out on the table.

"You don't exist. I will not listen to a figment of my imagination." Besides, she didn't want to kill Ed. She wouldn't mind hurting him a little though.

She frowned at the computer screen where it still displayed one of Meckler's autopsy reports. It reminded her of what Ed said that day. He said Meckler had told him that Vincent Fairman was a shifter. It still felt wrong to her, but if not Meckler, then who? His assistant maybe... what was his name again?

*Samuel, that was it.*

A buzzing sound distracted her and she frowned around the room. Movement on the table clued her in. It was her link. She had set it on silent mode when the reporters started calling. The damn thing was crawling along the table like a beetle. She watched as the vibrating nuisance headed for the edge; it was probably just another reporter. She wondered how

much he would offer her to where her story this time.

The link finally made its bid for freedom, but lightning fast reflexes had her catching it less than an inch below the tabletop. She thumbed the connect button.

“You’ve got to help me!”

She blinked. “J-bone, is that you?” His voice sounded funny, like he was standing in a tunnel.

“We’re in trouble, Chrissy, bad trouble. You’ve got to help me!”

She slumped back into her chair and rubbed a hand over her face wearily. She didn’t need this, not on top of everything else.

“This is a bad time for me, J-bone. I can’t deal with you right now.”

“They’ve got her, they’ve got Lil’ Tina! We didn’t know who else to call. You’ve got to come!”

“Whoa, calm down! Who is we?”

“Me... *us*,” J-bone said desperately. “The Rascals are camped in my damn living room—all of them! You’ve got to come quick, Chrissy, before something bad goes down.”

Tiny Rascals was the name of J-bone’s gang. A stupid name some might think; it was probably her fault for calling them that when they first came to her attention. That was a long time ago. They were no longer unwanted kids running loose through Monster Central. Nowadays, anyone disrespecting the Rascals did so at their peril. That J-bone sounded so scared was an indication of serious trouble.

“Define bad.”

J-bone lowered his voice. “Trigger wants to go after her. He’s riled the others up enough so they’ll back him.”

Trigger was a damn pain in the butt. He wasn’t one of her kids like J-bone and a lot of the current members of the Rascals. He was new to the area, but not unknown to her. She had checked him out months ago after J-bone mentioned him.

“What does TC say about it?”

"He don't like it, but he can't do nothin' to stop it."

She frowned. "Why not? What haven't you told me?"

J-bone lowered his voice even further. "I'm hiding in my john, Chrissy! I ain't got time to explain everything. TC is out. Trigger is in and calling the shots. You reading what I'm saying?"

She scowled. "I read you, now you read me. You tell Trigger that I'll haul his butt in if he so much as sticks his nose out your door before I get there!"

"I can't do that, Chrissy, you know I can't! I ain't got the juice."

She glanced at her kitchen clock and estimated it would take a half hour or more to get there. "I've got enough juice for both of us. You tell him what I said and make him believe it."

"I'll try, Chrissy, I *will* try, but you better come quick or it's my butt. I ain't kidding. If you don't come, I'm dead meat."

"Quit your whining; it's embarrassing. I said I'd be there. I'll be there. Now go tell him what I said."

J-bone sighed and then said, "I can't believe I'm gonna do this."

The line went dead.

Chris switched off her link, but then frowned at it. Maybe she should call Ken and have him meet her at J-bone's place... no. She could always call him later if she needed him. It would be best to learn the situation first hand before bringing the police into it. She didn't want her kids becoming community property. They were hers and she would protect them; even from themselves.

She shut down her computer and ejected the disc. She wouldn't let that item out of her possession. Not even for a minute.

In the bedroom, she chose a little-used coat and stuffed the disc into a pocket. Her gun went into the other pocket with her car keys. She would have preferred her jacket, but Ryder had destroyed it along with so much else. She hadn't

had the time to replace it.

Mark bought her the coat last year, but it had never fitted properly. It looked good on the new—slimmer—her. It was a full-length trench coat that reached her ankles. It had pockets deep enough that she didn't feel lost without a bag, and turning up the collar hid most of her face; a good thing these days. Her picture was everywhere.

She twitched the bedroom curtain aside and noted her drive was empty. That hadn't always been so. It had taken a couple of obscure bylaws, and a little string pulling by Cappy, to have the media park their vans up the street and not in front of her property. It hadn't helped in the end—the use of remotes pretty much negated anything she gained from the illusion of privacy, but today it would work to her advantage.

She patted her pocket for her keys and headed for the garage. Before leaving the house, she paused in the living room for one more item. She stood before the shelf and stared at the photograph of her dead partner. John was grinning at her and holding up a burnt burger on a fork like a trophy. He never had been much of a cook. His badge stood beside his picture with its embedded master key. Cappy knew she had it. He gave it to her himself at the funereal, but she doubted he had ever expected her to use it illegally. She picked it up and carefully removed the black ribbon.

She draped the ribbon over the corner of the photograph. "I'm only borrowing it, John. I'll bring it back. I promise."

She headed for the garage.

Chris reached J-bone's building in record time, and parked opposite the lobby doors in the no parking zone. She quickly crossed the street, agilely dodging the sparse traffic. The decrepit robot at the doors watched her approach and raised the stump of its arm in a failed attempt to open the door for her.

"*Urk*," it said forlornly as she passed by into the grimy looking building.

She looked around the lobby, but nothing had changed. The place still looked ready for demolition. She pressed the elevator call button, and the doors shuddered open. At least they worked, that was something. She stepped inside and selected J-bone's floor. The doors hesitated, as if unsure whether to close, but finally slid shut. Her last time here she had come to collect Sandy Hodges. Her life had certainly changed since then, and not in a good way. This bit of excitement with Tina was the closest she had come to police work in almost five weeks. No doubt Flint was making good use of her absence to worm her way into Ken's affections. Not that she needed to try very hard. Ken was already smitten with her.

She scowled.

Ken was old enough to know his own mind, but Flint was a real operator. She could twist him around her little finger without trying. That woman had been around the block a few times. Hell, she probably owned it by now!

The elevator groaned and rattled to a stop. The doors squeaked open and she stepped out into the dingy corridor. She paused to look around. It was quiet. The corridor, dimly lit at the best of times, was dark. Half the lights were out. Her hand slipped into her pocket to caress her gun. Something felt off. Without really thinking about it, she sniffed the air. Bloodsmell. Someone—an injured someone—had passed this way not long ago. She sniffed again, and tracked the scent of blood to a smeared handprint on the wall by the stairs. She reached out to see if it was still wet, but the sound of quiet breathing distracted her. She cocked her head, listening intently, and heard the regular thumpety-thump of a heartbeat. Lord and Lady, what next? Would she start hearing mouse farts at a hundred meters too?

She listened to the regular beat and shivered. "Goddess, Mother of All, help me."

A quiet chuckle drifted up the stairs. "You're gonna need more than prayers, Lil' Sis."

She peered into the darkness and made out a shape sitting

on one of the steps. "TC?"

"Yeah." A painful cough echoed up the stairwell. "It's me. Knew you would come... stupid. Too stupid to stay away."

"Oh yeah?" She quickly descended the stairs. "I'm not the one bleeding."

"Yet."

TC looked up, and her breath gusted out as if someone had hit her in the belly. His face was a mass of livid bruising. Both eyes were swollen nearly shut, and his lip was bleeding. His knuckles were split and he was cradling one hand protectively in the other. It was badly swollen and probably broken. He looked as if he had gone ten rounds in the ring with a ghoul.

A spike of burning hot rage crackled through her obliterating all thought. She dropped to one knee and grabbed him by the shoulders so he could not turn away.

"Who did it," she snarled, hardly recognizing her own voice.

"You're hurting me!"

She blinked at him in confusion. Hurting? She relaxed her grip. "Who did your face?"

TC looked away.

She shook him gently. "Come on, you're not ratting on anyone. This is me. Was it Trigger?"

"Some of it."

"Only some? What did he do, order the others to stomp on you?"

He shook his head. "He wouldn't do that, he'd lose their respect. You gotta fight your own battles, Lil' Sis."

That was a rule. There were other rules the Rascals lived by, not all of them logical. Fighting your own battles didn't mean the others wouldn't back you up in a fight, but it did mean you couldn't send someone else to fight in your place. If Trigger wanted to lead, he had to fight for it, which he had done by pounding on TC. As J-bone had said over the link, TC was out and Trigger was in—a bitter pill for TC to swallow. He had led the Rascals since the beginning.

"He took the Rascals away from you did he?"

TC nodded miserably.

"What caused it?"

"He's wanted this for a long time, but the thing with Lil' Tina was the capper."

"J-bone said something about her."

"He got in Trigger's face over it."

"J-bone did? I didn't know he had it in him."

TC shrugged and winced as abused muscles protested. "Neither did he, but he had your backing, so he thought he could get away with it. He was dead wrong."

She frowned worriedly. "Is he all right?"

"About as right as I am I figure."

"That bad?" she asked in concern.

TC grinned and spat blood on the step. "Maybe not, but close."

*Damn.* "Where's J-bone now?"

"In his apartment?"

"You're not sure?"

"I had other things on my mind," he said, indicating his face with his good hand.

She nodded sympathetically. "Want me to call an ambulance?"

He shook his head. "I know someone; she'll fix me up. I wanted to tell you what you're heading into first."

"So tell me."

"Cruz and Trigger used to be pretty tight, but then Cruz got it on with Lil' Tina, and suddenly he ain't got so much time for hanging out with Trigger. Trig goes around bad-mouthing Tina for a while, but then he settles down, and I think everything's fine. We go on like that for a couple of months. I figure Cruz will get tired of Tina, but he don't."

She groaned. "Don't tell me, Lil' Tina dumped him."

"You got it. Cruz was really busted up about it. It was kind of embarrassing the way he went on, you know? Anyway, Trigger starts bad-mouthing Tina again; only this time he says

some stuff that starts real trouble. He goes on about how Tina is hanging out with another guy. Cruz don't like it, but Trigger don't stop. He's rubbing Cruz's face in it you see?"

"And Cruz goes after Tina?"

"Yeah, but that ain't the worst of it. Tina admits it straight out. She says she don't want Cruz no more, but worse than that, she don't want *us* no more."

She whistled silently. "She wants out of the Rascals?"

"Yeah, screwy huh? Even worse than that, the guy she's hanging with is an Alley Dog!"

"That's not good."

The Alley Dogs were a set of the Eighteenth Street Crips, one of the largest gangs in the Republic. Worse, all Alley Dogs were shifters. What in the nine hells was Tina doing hanging with one of those animals?

"I wanted to fix it on the quiet—no way do we want a war with shifters—but Trigger took me down before I could do anything. The last I heard, he was planning to go after Tina's Alley Dog and drag her back."

"You think they plan to kill him?"

TC shrugged.

"You got a name for this Alley Dog?"

"Yeah. They call him Loco. It's some shifter thing to do with the moon. I don't know about that stuff, Sis, but maybe you do?"

She scowled. "Don't go there, TC. I'm not in the mood."

TC smiled uncertainly. "After Trigger put me down, I went to look for Tina."

"You warned her? Good thinking."

He shook his head. "I couldn't find her, but Loco found me easily enough." He held up his broken hand. "This was from him."

Bastard. She would have to take care of Loco when she found Tina. No one hurt her kids.

"I'll fix him. You're lucky he didn't bite you."

"Yeah I know," TC said with a grimace. "He said

something like that after busting me up. I don't feel very grateful just now."

"Can't say I blame you, but next week you'll look back and thank him."

TC shook his head. "I guess you would know. Listen, Sis, I'm sorry about what happened to you. When I saw it on the news, I was ready to hunt the bastard down for you—"

She raised a hand. "We're talking about you not me. Besides, hunting Ryder is my job." She stood. "Are you sure you don't need an ambulance? I've got my link, I can have one here in less than ten minutes."

TC struggled to his feet. "Don't need it." He started down the stairs. "Call me on my link if you need me. I'm going to get my hand fixed. I'll be fine in a couple of hours."

She regarded him skeptically. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. My friend's a witch."

"Handy."

"She's a great lay too!" TC called cheerfully over his shoulder. "You be careful in there, Lil' Sis. The Rascals ain't your kids no more."

She watched him out of sight then turned to go back upstairs.

Getting into J-bone's apartment was not a problem, simply knocking on the door sufficed. One of the Rascals answered, a girl everyone called Squeeze.

"How's it going?" Chris asked, stepping inside when Squeeze failed to invite her. "You still hanging with Jaybird?"

Squeeze nodded and shut the door.

Chris followed Squeeze into the apartment. She glanced around, counting twenty or so people lounging about the place. Their ages ranged from late teens to mid-twenties. Most of them 'belonged' to her, but those that didn't were easy to spot. Over the last couple of years, new and older faces had popped up to join the Rascals.

Her arrival met varying degrees of welcome. Some smiled and nodded, others looked uneasy. Some ignored her, while

others were openly hostile. What surprised her was the source of much of the hostility. She expected it from the newcomers; they didn't know her as a friend. They knew her as a cop, which she no longer was, but that wouldn't change their opinions. What she hadn't expected was the distrust she saw on the faces of some of 'her' kids, and it hurt.

Squeeze collapsed onto the sofa next to Jaybird.

Chris looked but didn't spot J-bone. "Where's J-bone?"

"He's in the kitchen—" Squeeze began, but Jaybird elbowed her arm to shush her.

Chris shoved her hands deeper into her pockets and leaned down to Jaybird's eye level. He was slumped on the sofa with one leg hooked over the arm. Jaybird was one of her kids and used to be one of her weasels like J-bone, but this past year he had stopped calling her. It had happened before of course. Kids grew up and things changed. Sometimes they came back to her, sometimes not.

"How's it going, Jay?"

He shrugged. "Was going great until you showed up."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

She flicked a glance at Squeeze. "He taking care of you?"

Squeeze snuggled closer to her man. "Oh yeah, is he ever!"

Chris grinned at Jaybird's blushes. "In the kitchen you said?"

They both nodded.

When she entered the kitchen, she found J-bone sitting at the table with his back to her. China was kneeling beside him with a damp cloth in her hands and trying to clean him up. China glanced up as Chris entered, but didn't say anything. After a moment, she went back to her nursing.

Chris smelled blood and pain on the air. "How bad is he?"

"I'm okay," J-bone mumbled.

"Shut up, J-bone, I wasn't talking to you. How bad?"

China shrugged. "Take a look for yourself." She stood and moved out of the way.

Chris rounded the table to get a good look, and tried to keep the dismay off her face. J-bone had been through the ringer. He looked even worse than TC if that was possible—there was more blood for one thing. His hands clutched each other on the table. Purple bruising covered his hands and his knuckles split and sore; he had obviously fought back. His right eye was badly bloodshot, but it remained open. The other eye had swollen completely shut. China had cleaned him up some, but already the cuts were seeping blood. They needed stitches.

J-bone tried to smile. "You came."

"I said I would, didn't I?" Chris sat at the table opposite him, and China went back to work with some Band-Aids. "He needs a hospital."

China shrugged and kept working. "He won't go."

"I ain't going to no hospital," J-bone lisped through cut and swollen lips. "I'll be fine, I've had worse."

Her eyebrows shot up. He was telling the truth. She hated it, but she could tell by his reactions. She had always been good at reading people, but now it felt like she could read them from the inside. She had Ryder—that bastard—to thank for her new talents. Her senses were ridiculously keen. Like earlier with TC, she could hear J-bone's heartbeat. It was slow and even. His scent and body language was full of pain, but there was no evasiveness in him.

"I'd like to hear about that sometime, but not now. Where is Trigger?"

J-bone's heart sped at the mention of his nemesis. "I told him what you said, but he wouldn't listen. I tried to stop him."

"Idiot," China said. It sounded like something she had said more than once today.

Chris agreed. "I told you to tell him not to leave. I didn't tell you to get your butt kicked over it!"

J-bone winced when China dabbed at his face a little too hard. "He was going after Tina, Chrissy. I had to do something. TC went to warn her. I had to give him time to find her."

"I've already talked to TC."

J-bone's good eye brightened. "You've seen him? Is he all right?"

She shrugged. "He looks better than you do. He didn't find Lil' Tina."

"Damn."

"He did find Loco, or rather, Loco found him."

China bit her lip. "He's not... Loco didn't..."

"Bite him? No. TC got off easy with a busted hand."

China relaxed a little. "Where is he?"

"He said he knew a witch who could fix him up."

China's lips thinned at hearing that, but J-bone took her mind off the news. He groaned and clutched his head. She turned her attention to him.

"You want some aspirin?"

"Yeah, thanks, China." He waited for his friend to leave before continuing. "Don't mention the witch again, Chrissy. China has a thing for TC, and she don't like hearing about his latest catch."

She rolled her eyes. "Let's get back to Tina. TC said she wants out of the Rascals."

"I don't think she knows *what* she wants. She had it good with Cruz. He would have done anything for her. What she thinks she's doing, I don't know."

"Got any ideas where I should start looking for her?"

J-bone frowned and then shrugged. "She's probably with Loco."

"What about Trigger?"

"He took Cruz and went gunning for Loco. Cruz wants Tina back, Chrissy. I don't think they'll take no for an answer."

China chose that moment to come back with the aspirin. She filled a glass with water and gave it to J-bone along with

two tablets.

J-bone swallowed the aspirin and chased them with water.  
“So, what do we do?”

“We? You’re in no shape to do anything. I’ll sort this mess out.”

“You can’t go after Loco alone.”

“Sure I can.”

J-bone just stared at her.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.”

“But what about Trigger and Cruz? They’re bound to show up there if they haven’t already.”

“I’ll worry about that when it happens.”

“Chrissy—”

She patted him on the shoulder. “I’ll be fine.”

“Chrissy, you can’t—”

She ignored him and hurried to leave the apartment, but China followed and caught up with her near the elevator.

Chris hit the call button. “Will you stick with J-bone for me?”

“Of course, but he’s right. You can’t go up against Loco alone. He’s a shifter.”

Her face twisted. “So am I.”

China stared. She had obviously forgotten that little bombshell. Chris didn’t laugh at her shocked expression. It wasn’t in the least funny.

China rallied her wits and tried again. “Yeah but—”

The elevator door slid aside, and Chris stepped into the car. She held the door open when it tried to close. “One more thing; get the others out of his damn apartment so he can rest. I don’t know what the hell they think they can do there.”

“Trigger told them to wait for him.”

She clenched her jaw making the muscles jump. “Get them out.”

She let the doors close.

\* \* \*

## **Dealing with the Devil**

Chris parked her car outside Lost Souls, and sat listening to the tick-tick noise of cooling metal. The club was something of a landmark in the area, and was very popular among the fashion conscious children of Los Angeles. It was a four-story neon bedecked brownstone edifice—a temple dedicated to pleasure. The club took up half a city block and stood out like a peacock among drab sparrows.

Monster Central was not an affluent area by any stretch of the imagination. Apart from a few high spots like Lost Souls, most of the Waterfront District needed major renovation. Considering the cost of such a programme, and everyone's indifference to non-human concerns, it wasn't surprising that the mayor had turned a deaf ear to the resident's pleas.

She watched the long line of patrons flowing into the club, wondering how many of them were rich kids, here to mingle with the monsters—monster groupies. Probably quite a few. She shook her head slowly. They didn't know the risk they were taking, or maybe they did, it could be part of the attraction. Lost Souls was owned and operated by Stephen Edmonton—a vampire not a shifter—but influential in the monster community and could help her if he chose.

And she did need help.

After leaving J-bone's apartment, she drove into Alley Dog territory intent upon finding Loco, but the streets were ominously quiet. People she talked with professed not to know anything. Worse than that, his gang's usual haunts were conspicuously devoid of Alley Dogs. Something was up; something big enough to call them off the streets. Tina wasn't important enough for that kind of reaction. At least, she didn't think so. Everywhere she went, she met blank looks and walls of silence.

Coming here was a last resort.

It was still day outside, but only just. Sunset was minutes away. Edmonton would be 'waking up' soon. She pulled her link out of her pocket, and punched in TC's number. He picked up on the second ring.

"Yo!"

"It's me."

"Where are you, Sis?"

"Outside Lost Souls."

"What the hell are you doing there? You're not thinking of going in are you?"

She ignored the question. "Listen. Has anything gone down I should know about?"

There was a long silence broken only by TC's breathing.

"Whatever it is, you know I'm going to find out. You might as well tell me now as later."

TC sighed. "Trigger and Cruz are missing."

"What?"

"They're *missing*. The word is they tried to kill Loco. I don't know if that's true or not. Probably is, but I can't be sure. It don't matter anyway. Trigger has got his damn war, but he ain't going to be around to fight it."

She gritted her teeth. What else could go wrong? "Why didn't you call me?"

TC snorted. "How would that help? You would have gone charging in and got yourself killed for nothing. Trigger and

Cruz are dead already. No point in you following them.”

“They’re dead?”

“They must be.”

“But you don’t know for sure,” she said intently. “*Do* you know for sure?”

“No, but if they ain’t, they’ll wish they was. Stay out of it, Sis. The others say that now Trigger is gone, they want things back the way they was. I’m gonna let Lil’ Tina go if that’s what she wants. I want to calm things down. We can’t fight the Alley Dogs, Sis. They’ll bury us, or worse, make us like them.”

The thought of her kids facing a monster like Ryder was unacceptable. “You’re right, you can’t fight them.”

**But we can.**

She jumped. Her knuckles whitened on her link, threatening to break it. “I’ll see what I can find out and get back to you.”

“Stay out of it, Sis! You hear me—”

She switched off her link and stuffed it into her pocket. She climbed out of the car and headed toward the crowded main entrance of the club.

Lost Souls was a monster club in that its clientele was heavily biased toward non-humans, but for all of that, it was an up market place on anyone’s scale. Had she not known its reputation, she would have thought it a place for the rich and the beautiful to rub shoulders with each other. Its theme, strictly adhered to by visitors, was the 1920s era. All the men wore flashy tuxedos under their topcoats; the women wore long dresses and dripped with fake jewelry... at least she assumed it was phony.

The uniformed gods guarding the doors were alike as twins and perfect specimens of maleness. One whiff of them had her neck hairs at attention and her heart pounding. Her passenger started humming in the back of her head. In her mind’s eye, she saw a huge wolf grinning at her.

“Don’t even think about it,” she muttered under her breath.

**We need a mate.**

"I'm not talking to you about this!"

Amusement radiated from her passenger.

It was intolerable the way it watched everything. It was like having a reporter on her shoulder ready to comment on anything she did. Damn! She joined the other club patrons, and trotted up the steps toward the doors. Before she could enter, a huge hand descended on her shoulder to cut her out of the herd. She brushed the hand off with a snarl.

The doorman smiled pleasantly, but his eyes were empty. In a bored voice he said, "Dress code."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Code," she said, flashing her badge in his face. "Do we have a problem?"

He frowned, not understanding the joke. "No jeans, no sneakers, and no..."

"Trench coats?"

"Yeah."

She nodded. "How about no *license*?" He blinked in confusion and she sighed. Some people just didn't understand her brand of humor. "I'm here on police business. Is that any clearer?"

"You're a shifter—"

"Don't remind me," she muttered.

"—you can't go in dressed like that."

**Stupid. We don't like him.**

Chris agreed wholeheartedly. "One way or another, I'll be going in, but I'll give you a break. Go tell the manager that Lieutenant Humber insists on seeing him."

He frowned, trying to work out what he should do. He decided on caution. "Follow me."

"Good boy."

He ignored that.

He led her inside toward a reception area where people were leaving their hats and coats. She stared at the scene. There were two women wearing sequined dresses taking the items, and giving the patrons a ticket in exchange. They were

hatcheck girls, or would have been hatcheck girls a hundred years ago. She supposed they called themselves hostesses or something now.

“Wait here.”

She turned to see the doorman hurrying toward a door marked *Staff Only*. She was tempted to follow him but restrained herself. She was here in need of information and help. Antagonizing the management wouldn't be a good start. She thrust her hands deep into her pockets and took in the view. She frowned. The patrons were all exceptionally good looking. Perfect people made her uneasy. They were too good to be true. Most were shifters, but she scented humans among them. In addition, there were a couple of vamps. She glanced at the main doors and noted the sun was down. It had to be for them to be awake. They had a distinctive scent that she could never confuse with anything else. It was dry and musty with a metallic tang to it. She kept a wary eye on them as they made their way into the club proper.

“Mr. Tansey will see you,” the doorman said, reappearing at her shoulder.

“Where?”

“Go through that door and up the stairs. You'll be met.”

“I bet,” she muttered, wondering by what.

The doorman went back to his post, and Chris crossed the foyer to enter the door he had indicated. As expected, there were stairs leading up. She climbed them to the first landing where a woman waited for her. She was dressed for a party in a long backless evening gown. On one wrist she wore a gold charm bracelet, and on the other, a tasteful watch with jeweled strap. Her hands were small and graceful, but her nails looked wickedly sharp. She had chosen a blood red nail polish and lipstick that contrasted sharply with her dead white complexion.

She smiled, revealing a hint of fang. “I'm Danyelle.”

Chris wanted to back up and pull her gun, but she forced herself not to move and avoided Danyelle's eyes.

Chris' passenger growled unhappily as Danyelle's scent—unsuccessfully masked by expensive perfume—wafted to them.

"Lieutenant Humber," she said belatedly, realizing Danyelle was waiting for a response.

"I know who you are. What do you want?"

"I think that's between Mr. Tansey and me, don't you?"

"Follow."

Chris followed Danyelle up to the manager's office.

Opposite the door, a spartan desk dominated the room. Behind it, there was a single large window through which she could make out the club proper. A man was sitting behind the desk when she entered. By his scent, she judged him human, but there was something underlying it that said he was more than that. She was too new to all the strangeness to make a determination about him. She decided to put him on the monster side of her list of acquaintances. He would stay there until she could figure him out.

He rose to his feet when she entered. "Welcome to Lost Souls, Miss Humber. I'm Edward Tansey, the day manager."

"That would be *Lieutenant* Humber."

Tansey smiled; it didn't reach his eyes. "Would it? May I see some identification?"

"I need to see your owner," she said, and flashed her badge for him. Tansey glanced at it, obviously not really interested.

"My *employer* is a very busy man. I shall enquire." He rounded his desk again and reached for his desktop link.

She hadn't meant it like that. She had meant the owner of the club, but his stress on the word *employer* told her all she needed to know about him. No wonder he didn't feel right. He was Edmonton's familiar. A vampire's familiar was his eyes and ears in the daylight world. There were all kinds of mystical bullshit associated with them. She didn't know fact from fiction regarding that stuff, but if only half what she had heard about familiars was true, it was more than bad enough. Some called them human servants, but quislings were what

they really were.

Tansey stared at Chris and nodded at something he heard over the link. "Seems to be... no, Danyelle is here with me. You think that wise? Fine then, I'll tell her. Bye." He sat back and smiled. This time there was real amusement behind the smile. "Danyelle, please escort Miss Humber to Stephen."

There was that *Miss Humber* again. Was he trying to annoy her on purpose? There was nothing to indicate surprise on the vampire's perfect marble-smooth face, but she was surprised all the same. Vampires, as a general rule, do not breathe unless they want to talk, so changes in Danyelle's non-existent respiration wasn't what clued Chris in. No, she had picked up the subtle change in Danyelle's scent.

*How do I know what it means?*

**We know.**

Chris swallowed the sarcastic rejoinder that leapt to her lips. It was bad enough that she was hearing voices; she wasn't about to compound things by making the conversation public.

Danyelle crossed the room to another door and opened it. She looked back when Chris failed to follow her through. "Stephen is waiting."

"Why can't he come here?"

Tansey stood and rounded the desk again. "Why should he? You asked for this meeting, Miss Humber. Common courtesy—"

"This isn't a courtesy call. It's police business."

"But you aren't on duty. Are you, *Miss Humber*?"

"I always consider myself on duty, Mr. Tansey. Where is Mr. Edmonton?"

"He is attending a function arranged by an associate of his. It's a purely business affair. Stephen assures me you are quite welcome to join him."

She glanced at the statue Danyelle had become then back at Tansey. This didn't feel right. They were too eager for her to join Edmonton.

"Just give me the address. I'll make my own way there."

Tansey's smile faltered. "Ah... that won't be possible I'm afraid. Your invitation is contingent upon an escort. Danyelle will accompany you, but if you would prefer not to go, I'm sure Stephen will understand. I can make an appointment for you to see him in a few days. Shall we say this coming Thursday?"

She scowled. Anything could happen in that time. She had Trigger and Cruz to find, and then there was Tina. The stupid girl had started all this by hanging out with a shifter. If Chris didn't find her quickly, there could be another body clattering a dark alley tonight.

"Lead the way," she said, joining Danyelle.

Danyelle turned and stepped through the door.

Chris looked back to find Tansey watching her. He nodded and smiled. She didn't respond. Instead, she pushed through the door and followed a vampire into what might be a trap. Following a monster without backup *again!* Was she nuts? She snorted. Of course she was, she was hearing voices wasn't she?

She caught up with her escort and paced by her side. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see. There's no need to be frightened, not yet."

"I'm curious, not frightened."

A frown marred Danyelle's lovely face. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why aren't you frightened of me?"

Chris pursed her lips in thought. That was a good question. "I'm not sure. Look, don't take this wrong, but you don't look very scary."

"But you know what I am. What I look like should make no difference."

That was true. Vampires fed on people. They were evil, and Chris doubted Danyelle would mind snacking on her. Shifter blood might make a nice change. Who knew?

"Okay, but what can you really do? You can't make me into one of you. Shifters are immune."

“I could kill you.”

She shrugged.

“Everyone fears death.”

Danyelle opened a door leading to a short flight of stairs and led the way down. At the bottom, another door led outside into an alley running behind the club. The alley was dark, but Chris’ eyes were keen these days. They penetrated the gloom easily. A short way along, a limo awaited them. Danyelle opened the rear door and Chris ducked to enter the car.

Danyelle halted Chris with a touch on her arm. “Everyone fears death, *everyone*,” she said as if trying to reassure herself.

Chris shrugged her off and climbed into the car.

Danyelle hesitated only briefly before joining her inside.

As soon as they were seated, the car started and pulled smoothly away. There was a partition between the driver and passenger compartments, but Chris didn’t doubt another vamp was doing the driving. She ought to be worried about that, but all she could think about was her coming meeting with Edmonton and finding Tina. Cruz and Trigger were a side issue as far as she was concerned. She would get them out of the fix they were in if she could, but Tina came first.

After leaving the city, they drove east for roughly an hour on I-215 toward Adelanto. She hadn’t expected to leave the city. There were places more convenient where monsters could hold their sorority meetings—the waterfront had plenty of rundown buildings to choose from, so why travel outside the city? The desert wasn’t somewhere she would have chosen, but she supposed they had their reasons. It didn’t have to make sense to her, only to them.

Their destination was the long abandoned George Air Force Base. She knew because faded signs still pointed the way; the desert storms had failed to sandblast them into complete illegibility. The base was closed at the end of the last century as a result of budget cuts. Civilian pilots had continued to use the airfield for a while, but even that limited use was in the

past. George AFB was a ghost town now; the living quarters, once housing airmen and their families, were home only to cockroaches. The only things moving on the runways and taxiways these days were tarantulas and coyotes.

The car turned onto the aptly named Phantom Street, through what remained of the main gate, and onto the base. Off to her right, she could make out a group of huge fuel tanks. They were still white after all these years, and seemed to glow in the darkness. A small brick building stood separated from them by a broken down fence. To the west lay the flatlands of the desert, barren except for scraggly sagebrush, and beyond that lay the mountains and eventually *Los Angeles*.

She stared into the darkness. Deserted streets and houses gave way to a few tumbled down administrative buildings. A road sign came and went. Saber Boulevard it proudly announced.

"Why here? Why not somewhere in the city?"

Danyelle looked at Chris measuringly. "It's easier to hide the bodies."

"That's not funny."

"It wasn't meant to be. It's time you realized something."

"Oh yeah? What would that be?"

"We, you and I, are not human."

Chris stared, but Danyelle was serious. "Oh that little thing. Boy, I'm real glad you're here to tell me these things."

"You mock, but you don't really understand what it means to be one of us."

"By one of us you mean one of the monsters."

"If you like."

Chris scowled. "I don't like as it happens, but not liking it means nothing."

"At least you realize that. You are one of us now. Pretending you are not will gain you nothing but pain, and it might bring much worse."

"See, now you've gone and lost me again. I'm not pretending to be anything. What you see is what you get with

me.”

“That is not true. It’s not true of any of us, and especially not true of a shifter like you.” Danyelle cocked her head and studied Chris for a long moment. “Do you know what I see when I look at you?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me,” Chris muttered sourly.

“I see someone who doesn’t know herself. Someone who pretends she’s human and wants desperately to make it true. Hiding what you are from humans might work—they see only what they want to see—but trying it with us will not. It might get you killed.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, and if you had bothered to learn more about us you would realize it. You still think like a human. You cannot afford that, especially not here and now. In our world, you are either one of those who rule or one of those ruled. There is no in between. Which one you will be depends on how strong you are.”

Chris shrugged. “I’m not into status games.”

“You don’t understand—”

“And I don’t want to.”

“You need to hear this! We’re nearly there.”

“Let’s talk about something else. What’s this meeting about?”

“You might not be into what you call status games, but I assure you the rest of us are. Our lives are defined by it. Yours will be too. You have *got* to stop thinking in the old way!”

“What are we doing in the middle of the desert?”

Danyelle sighed and shook her head pityingly. “You have a very rude awakening coming. I hope you’re strong enough to stand it. As for this meeting, Stephen was asked to mediate a dispute between packs.”

“What’s the argument about?”

“The usual—territory.”

“Since when do shifters need help with that?”

“Since we all agreed that the coming amendments are a

good thing, and that a war between packs would put them in jeopardy.”

Chris grunted; politics again. She remembered Mark talking about it... it seemed like years ago, but it was only a few weeks back. She ought to take a greater interest now that it affected her directly, but she couldn't summon the enthusiasm.

The car took another turn. Chris looked out the window in time to catch sight of their destination. It was one of the base's old hangars. Dozens of cars and trucks were parked in no particular order outside it. The huge hangar doors were open a few feet and light spilled out into the night.

The limo rolled to a stop next to another one. Edmonton's maybe, or maybe not. It wasn't the only limo. There was another one parked some distance away separated from them by a sea of Toyota's, Fords, and Chryslers. Danyelle opened her door and climbed out. She stood by the car tensely scanning the night. Chris joined her and waited to see what would happen. Were they waiting for an invitation? Perhaps there was some other protocol involved that she didn't know about... another escort maybe?

“What are we waiting for...” she asked but then felt it.

**Danger!**

She was crouching before she knew it. She had pulled her gun instinctively, but she had no target. Danyelle stood as before still searching the night. Chris' neck hairs lifted as the scent of dozens of shifters flowed over her. Her lips rippled back and she bared her teeth in a snarl. She was growling like an animal from deep in her chest, and couldn't stop.

Danyelle looked sharply at her. “Do nothing, or we both die.”

**Let me out and I will protect us.**

“No.”

“You must do as I say.”

“I wasn't talking to you,” Chris said and would have explained, but Danyelle nodded as if she already understood.

She probably did. She must know other shifters.

“Put the gun away. It will do you no good anyway.”

“Don’t give me orders,” Chris growled, but she did thrust the gun back into her pocket. “What in the nine hells are they doing out there in the desert?”

“I told you in the car why this place is so useful. Work it out for yourself.”

Danyelle had said George AFB was good for... hiding bodies? She looked sharply at the vampire and thought she saw a flash of amusement just leaving her face.

Danyelle nodded toward the west. “Here they come.”

Chris turned in time to see the night come alive. She was confused when what she took to be a pack of dogs flowed across the runway toward her, but the surprise lasted only seconds. Her eyes might be fooled, but her nose wasn’t and neither was her passenger. The newcomers were shifters. They weren’t werewolves, she knew enough to know that. Werecyotes? Were there such things? The evidence before her said yes.

“Who are they?”

Danyelle smiled briefly. “Locals. They look after the place for us, and keep prying eyes away. The base is part of their range. Coyotes are very territorial you know.”

The werecyotes didn’t stop coming when they found Danyelle and Chris in their path. The pack simply split in two, flowed around them, and merged into one again just before pouring through the hangar doors. One or two of the beasts were curious enough to turn their heads to look up at them as they passed, but none stopped.

She was just congratulating herself on staying composed in the middle of a shifter stampede, when the night played a dirty trick on her. The last of the coyotes had just trotted past, when the darkness vomited up a pair of horrors. Her thoughts flashed to Ryder and the dirty alley where her life had ended in blood and pain.

“Calm,” Danyelle said tensely. “Stay calm. Your fear will

excite them, and me come to think of it. It affects all of us the same. We're all hunters in our way."

It was all right for Danyelle to say stay calm. One of these things hadn't ripped her apart. Chris forced her fear down and tried to distract herself with questions.

"Why do they look like that and not like the others?"

"They're alphas. Do you know what that means?"

"Alphas are the strongest."

Danyelle nodded. "The strong lead and the rest follow if they know what's good for them. The stronger you are the more control you have over the Change."

"You mean they *want* to look like that?"

"Yes."

"*Why?*" Chris asked incredulously.

Danyelle looked at her as if she were dense. "Which is more frightening, a coyote no different to a mundane one except in size, or one of those things?"

Chris nodded slowly.

They probably thought frightening someone was better than fighting them. They were good at it too; it was working on her. Just looking at them made her shiver.

She watched the monsters warily as they approached. They didn't look the way Ryder had that night except in a general way. They walked erect on their oddly shaped legs as Ryder had done, and they were tall like him—easily seven feet—but these things were obviously kin to coyotes not wolves. Their pelts were dark grey not black, and both of them had light grey bellies with a mane of long hair running down their backs. Like Ryder, they did have sharp claws on hands and feet, but their heads seemed smaller, narrower, and their amber colored eyes were set closer together as a result. In short, they fit her definition of what shifters should look like—monstrous.

The huge creatures stopped and stared down at her. Both of them were obviously male. The evidence hung grotesquely huge and all too visible between their legs. She forced herself to look away and up at their faces. They loomed over her,

crowding her on purpose, and her passenger objected. Strongly. She was suddenly hot and itchy all over, as her beast tried to trigger the Change. Her skin felt like a million ants were doing the polka on her, and her muscles tensed. She felt her skin ripple over her back, and with it a wave of pain as things inside tried to change.

"I won't let you out," she whispered through gritted teeth.

Her answer was a snarl of rage and another flood of heat, but the itching did ease and the pain with it. She sighed in relief as her passenger settled down. Her eyes narrowed when she realized the newcomers were laughing at her. They knew what had almost happened and were grinning at her. She felt anger building again, but that was dangerous. It could trigger the Change. She couldn't let them make her angry.

She waved a hand in front of her face and forced a nonchalant grin onto her face. "Phew! You boys need some mouthwash. What the hell have you been eating?"

A rumble of warning came from the one on the left. In a barely understandable guttural voice he said, "You think you funny, little wolf. Should ask who we eat, not what."

That wiped the grin off her face; she wasn't sure it was a joke. Danyelle's expression made her think it was not. Her stomach flip-flopped and she swallowed hard to keep her dinner from reappearing.

"Leave her alone, Jonas," Danyelle said.

"Why, what special about her? She want me go, she make me go," the grinning monstrosity said.

"Stephen invited her. She's his guest and under my protection."

Jonas ignored Danyelle. She stepped forward to make her displeasure felt.

Remembering the lecture about status, Chris waved Danyelle back. "I'm not special, Jonas, but will this do?" She pushed her gun hard against his belly.

He looked down at the gun buried in his fur. "Pull trigger.

I not die.”

“But it will hurt a lot,” she agreed quickly. She hadn’t considered he might not die, but of course he wouldn’t. Ryder hadn’t, and he had taken a lot more than a single bullet in the belly. “If you make me pull the trigger, Jonas, I’ll make sure the second one takes your balls off.”

Jonas’ friend grinned at that.

“Now I don’t know much about shifters,” Chris continued, “but I’m betting it will take quite a while for them to grow back... will they grow back do you think?”

Jonas surprised her. He made a sound like choking—he was laughing. He backed up then said, “All good. She strong enough.”

“We will see,” Danyelle said.

“She fine. We go,” Jonas said and trotted away.

Chris watched him and his friend enter the hangar and then turned back to Danyelle for an explanation. “What was that about?”

Danyelle began walking, leading the way to the hangar. Chris held back, but she had a job to do. Edmonton was in there and she needed him. She couldn’t leave, not now. She trotted a little way and then walked beside Danyelle.

“What’s the secret, Danyelle? Who is Jonas and what did he mean?”

“It’s not a secret. If Jonas hadn’t stopped to talk, one of the others would have before the night was out. His quiet friend’s name is Leon Pullen. Have you heard that name?”

Chris frowned. “I don’t think so. Should I have?”

Danyelle shrugged and stopped just before the hangar doors. “It was on the news, but it doesn’t matter. Leon is an alpha like Jonas, and they’re friends as much as two alphas can be. Their packs are the largest in the area. They would normally be rivals for the territory, but they have a treaty and don’t fight each other. No matter what it takes, Jonas and Leon keep the peace here.” Danyelle looked hard at Chris. “*Whatever* it takes.”

“What’s that to do with me?”

“New recruits are always trouble. They can’t help it, but that holds no weight with us. It sounds harsh, but we have no time for those who cannot adjust to our world. Troublemakers, or those too weak to survive, generally don’t.”

“I’m not here to cause trouble.”

“It was too late the moment you were bitten.”

Chris bit her lip. More complications she didn’t need. How would this effect what she needed to do here? Maybe it wouldn’t have a bearing, but she couldn’t count on it.

“Is it just because I’m a police officer?”

Danyelle stared. “You hear, but you do not listen. I told you in the car that status is everything to us. What do you think that means? You *were* a police officer. That time belongs to the human world and the past. It means nothing here and now. You have no status... none that we recognize. You will have none until you prove your dominance. Among us—shifter or vampire it doesn’t matter—status must be earned. We have to constantly prove our strength.”

“You mean use it or lose it?”

“Exactly, and losing it is death. New recruits are always trouble because they upset the status quo. They don’t know their place. Until they prove themselves, no one knows how they should react to them.”

“Oh great,” Chris said with a heartfelt sigh. “You mean I’ll have to join this pissing contest before I can talk to Edmonton?”

Danyelle shook her head. “You are his guest; of course he will meet with you. Anything else you want will have to be earned.”

Chris nodded.

They stepped through the door together.

\* \* \*

## Rituals

Chris felt uncomfortable the moment she entered the hangar. It was cavernous, easily big enough to house ten times the numbers currently occupying it, but still it felt confining. A couple of hundred people should have been lost within it, but there was something about shifters that filled any space they occupied. The air felt thick, the building filled to capacity and beyond despite the evidence of her eyes. So many shifters in one place filled the air with conflicting scents and made her passenger restless. Chris echoed its unease.

There were shifters of all shapes and sizes. Men and women who looked human from behind proved to be something else when they turned and revealed eyes with cat-like slit pupils, or eyes that glowed amber or gold.

Everyone was talking at once, the sound blurring into an incomprehensible babble of voices. There were wolves here. Her passenger noticed them at the same moment Chris did. She could feel its interest, but to her surprise, it didn't try to trigger the Change. It was alert, but wary.

Laughter made her check her stride, suddenly sure it was her they were laughing at, but when she located those laughing, they weren't paying the slightest attention to her. She stared at

the group where they lounged on the floor chatting together. There were six—four men and two... *things*. The men were naked as the day they were born and obviously didn't care who noticed. She couldn't call the things reclining with them women, because although they were female, they were like Jonas—Changed.

She turned a slow circle on the spot. Variations of the scene were repeated everywhere she looked.

Jonas' coyotes were here somewhere, but the few she saw didn't account for half of them. They must have changed back to human form. There were a lot of unclothed people wandering around; maybe they were coyotes sometimes? Shifters were not body conscious by any stretch of the imagination. A lucky thing, because changing forms must be hell on their wardrobes. She couldn't see Jonas or his quiet friend, but she wouldn't recognize either of them in human guise.

In the centre of the hangar, an area had been left empty, and a square roughly thirty feet to a side had been chalked upon the concrete floor. A long trestle table had been set up aligned with one of its sides. It was nothing fancy, just a beaten up wooden table with a row of plastic chairs tucked under it. There were a few items seemingly discarded on its surface: a portable comp, some papers, and a couple of carafes of water with glasses.

Chris smelled the scent of fresh blood, and her passenger went hyper alert. Beneath the tantalizing scent, she picked up others; scents layered deeply over the bloodstained concrete whispering to her of old blood and terror. Her skin crawled—heat followed by a ripple of something running up both her arms.

"Stop that," she hissed under her breath. In her head, she could see an agitated wolf pacing back and forth.

Danyelle cut across the corner of the square towards a man dressed in an Armani suit and sunglasses. Surrounding him at a respectful distance, a dozen men and women silently

watched every direction at once. They stood widely separated from each other, trying hard to remain unnoticed. They failed miserably. For one thing, their scents gave them all away as vamps, and they each had a telltale bulge under their jackets. They wore them unbuttoned so they could reach those mysterious bulges quickly. Their looks and attitude shouted security team.

Edmonton wore his hair long in a ponytail like a waterfall of night down his back, and his skin was very white. As Chris approached him, she noticed he was wearing a plain gold wedding band. It was dull and battered, and seemed out of place, especially when he also wore a flashy gold Rolex watch.

A woman stood beside him listening attentively to Danyelle. She must have died very young, around nineteen or twenty, but looks could be deceptive. She could be centuries old; vamps were tricky like that. She was wearing a black business jacket over a painfully white blouse and knee length skirt, none of which could possibly match Danyelle's backless evening gown for elegance, but for all of that, she had a quiet beauty all her own.

"...is done for now," Edmonton was saying to Danyelle. "With David's help, we should be able to keep the lid on a little longer."

"Do you think it will be enough?"

Edmonton turned to his young-looking companion. "Marie?"

She cocked her head. "I think so. David knows what's at stake. I think we can trust him to keep his people on a tight leash."

Danyelle nodded. "I wasn't questioning David's abilities. Of course he's trustworthy, but will keeping things quiet be enough to win us the vote?"

Marie shook her head gently. "I don't think even the President knows the answer, and the polls are evenly split. It will be close, but I think we'll win."

"Let us hope so," Edmonton said. "If I knew of a way to

ensure victory... but let us not talk of that now, I am being discourteous to our guest." He smiled charmingly at Chris and offered his hand to shake. "Welcome to our little get together, Miss Humber. I trust the drive out here was not too onerous. Did Danyelle keep you entertained?"

"Oh yeah, she was a real riot," Chris said sourly.

She stared at the offered hand for a tense moment. She could feel her passenger's guarded watchfulness. It didn't like being so close to three vampires. Neither did she, but she forced herself to take Edmonton's hand for a brief shake. Very brief.

"Really?" Edmonton pinned Danyelle with an intense look. "My dear, Danyelle, what *have* you been telling her?"

Danyelle stepped back a little. "Nothing, Stephen. I swear I told her nothing."

"Nothing?" he asked as if tasting the word. "That hardly sounds like you, Danyelle."

"She tried to teach me about your status games," Chris said, interrupting the power trip Edmonton had going.

"I don't play games, Miss Humber. I doubt Danyelle said I do."

She stared at Edmonton's sunglasses, foolishly wishing he would remove them. He didn't seem angry, but gauging his expression without seeing his eyes was hard. She wasn't yet comfortable with all the strangeness to rely upon her other senses alone.

"Call me Chris. Calling me Miss Humber makes me want to look over my shoulder. There's only one Miss Humber in my family, and that's Aunty Janice."

Edmonton smiled. "In that case, you may call me Stephen."

"Okay, Stephen. I do appreciate your seeing me on short notice like this, but I don't have time for idle chit-chat. I need your help or someone's going to die."

The silence between them stretched out. The barest of smiles crossed Stephen's face and was gone.

He removed his sunglasses and gestured at her with them. "I'm waiting to learn how it concerns me. Do I know this soon to be dead person?"

"I don't think so."

"Does this person work for me, or for someone I am affiliated with?"

"No but—"

"Then I fail to see how it's any of my business."

She kept her eyes focused on the knot of his tie, not willing to risk the power undoubtedly resident in his. "Her real name is Tina Rowe, but she goes by the moniker of Lil' Tina."

"Ah, a child of the modern age. Which gang?"

"Little Rascals. Do you know it?"

"I do not believe so. Should I?"

She shrugged. "It's a human gang, so probably not. Tina is a friend of mine. She's in some trouble, and I think you can help."

Stephen glanced at Danyelle. "Go back to the club. Chris will accompany me back in my car." Danyelle nodded once and left without a word. "I was pleased when Edward called me about your visit. I have wanted to meet you for some time now. Can you guess why?"

"It can't be my dazzling personality."

He raised an eyebrow. "It can't? Would it surprise you to learn that you are something of a celebrity among us?"

Chris scowled. "I have no control over what the newsies say about me."

Marie grinned.

"I've been following your exploits," Edmonton said. "Especially the most recent of them... the shifter slayings?" He waved a hand at those nearby. "I suspect everyone here knows who you are. The media has taken a particular interest in you, especially that Davis fellow. His column is a little overblown for my tastes, but I have to admit he does have a flair for the dramatic."

"I didn't come here to talk about Ed Davis," she said

tightly.

Stephen cocked his head. "You don't like him I see."

"We have a history."

"Forgive me, I did not know that. Let us change the subject then, and talk of why you came to me. This Tina person, how is she in need of my help?"

Chris relaxed tight shoulders and began her story. She told him about her kids, and how she looked out for them. About TC and J-bone, and how J-bone contacted her with his fears about Tina and Loco. When she told him about her search for Trigger and Cruz in Alley Dog territory, Stephen finally reacted. He looked sharply at Marie.

Marie nodded in silent acknowledgement and hurried away.

"What?" Chris asked suspiciously. "What did I say?"

"Did Danyelle tell you why I was asked to come here?"

"Something about a territorial dispute between packs."

"Correct. That was dealt with before you arrived, as was one other minor matter. Both problems involved Alley Dogs. Pederson and his pack are starting to become more than a mere annoyance."

"Pederson?"

"Raymond Pederson is alpha of the Alley Dog pack, or gang if you prefer. He was an ally of mine once, but no longer. Another man—a better more honorable man—took his place. He has never truly forgiven either one of us for that."

"How dangerous is he?"

"Anyone can be dangerous given the right motivation, but I do not fear him if that's what you mean."

"Would you admit it if you did?"

Stephen smiled briefly. "You are learning. Pederson is a shifter, an alpha, and something of a psychopath when all is said. Any of those things makes him someone to be wary of. There are many like him among the shifters of Los Angeles."

She didn't like the sound of that. Tina hanging around with Loco was bad enough, but if this Pederson was as

unstable as Stephen made him seem, even she might have trouble saving the girl.

"*Can* you help me get Tina back?"

"Possibly. Ordinarily we do not interfere with each other's business. It's safer for all concerned, but I do have some influence with the shifters. Even Pederson, despite our mutual dislike, can be reasoned with."

"But?"

Stephen smiled. "But it will cost me."

"How much?"

"That remains to be seen, but I can guarantee Pederson will drive a hard bargain. I doubt money will satisfy."

So did she. "Now I know you *can* help, *will* you?"

Stephen nodded. "If you agree to help me in return."

"Nothing illegal," she warned.

He waved that away impatiently. "I'm sure I don't have to remind you of what I am. I'm hardly in the habit of recruiting outsiders to do 'the dirty work' as they say."

She snorted. "What have you got in mind?"

"I want you to attend a press conference Marie is arranging. AML has been running a campaign against the amendments in the media. I need you to help me counter them. There will be interviews with reporters, talk shows... the usual kind of thing."

*Oh no... not that.*

Stephen noted the sour look on her face. "Think of it as a learning experience. Your name could be worth a lot of votes for our side. Marie thinks so, and I trust her judgment. You'll have a chance to tell your story, and in a good cause."

"Your cause you mean."

"Yours too." He paused for a long considering moment. "You need to let the past go. Believe me. I know something about this. Trying to live in the past doesn't work; you have to move forward. You need to do what is right for Chris the shifter, not what is right for Chris the human. She doesn't exist anymore. Besides, I thought you were doing this for Tina?"

She took a deep breath and nodded. "For Tina."

"Excellent. I'll have Marie make all the arrangements. She'll be in touch with you."

Just then, Marie returned with two men in tow. Chris didn't recognize either man at first. One was wearing a pair of ragged jeans and nothing else. Not even shoes. The other was dressed like a biker in leathers. When they got close enough, she picked up their scents, and recognized Jonas as the one in the jeans. She looked him up and down and he grinned.

Jonas did a little twirl. "You like?"

She snorted, but she did like what she saw. Jonas looked to be in his late forties and had shaggy straw-colored hair in this form. His eyes were grey-green now, not amber, and he had a strong face. His upper body was muscular, and he was just the right height—not that she wanted to kiss him or anything. Eye candy or not in human form, and he was that despite his age, he was one of the monsters... all be it a playful one.

"Very pretty," she said, smirking. "But I saw the real you outside."

That wiped the smile off his face. "You think so?"

"How many more of you can there be?"

"You'd be surprised."

She frowned and looked at the other man. "Leon, is that you?"

Jonas smirked, but his companion scowled. "Stupid bitch can't even tell us apart."

"She's new."

"Don't make excuses for her, Jonas. She should still be able to tell I'm not one of your butt sniffing desert lovers."

Chris realized her mistake. He was wolf not coyote. "Huh, you have got to be Pederson."

Stephen nodded. "Indeed he is. Raymond Pederson, meet Chris Humber."

Pederson sneered. "I know who she is, and what she wants."

"Good for you," Chris said sarcastically. "You have

someone who belongs to me. I want her back.”

“Try to take her.”

She stepped angrily toward him. “I’ll do more than try.”

Jonas pushed between them. “No fighting.”

Pederson glared angrily. “Get out of my way, Jonas. She challenges me.”

“I heard no challenge,” Stephen said quickly and glared at Chris when she would have remedied that. “You know this place is neutral ground. Jonas *will* enforce our laws, won’t you Jonas?”

Jonas smiled nastily at Pederson who stepped away to give himself fighting room. “You bet I will, and with great pleasure. My pack has been bitching about the lack of action around here lately.”

Chris stepped around Jonas. “Whoa, whoa, *whoa!* This is my fight not yours.”

“It’s no one’s fight if I say it ain’t,” Jonas growled. “You’re on my range, girly.”

*Girly?* She mouthed the word silently, and anger mounted. “You listen to me you flea-bitten pain in the arse! I didn’t ask for your help, and I don’t want it. I came here to see Stephen not you. *Butt out!*”

Stephen shook his head. “He can’t do that. Jonas and his pack are our enforcers. Any judgments handed down here are carried out by his pack. Infractions of our laws are punished harshly... again by his pack members.”

“I don’t care. I’m not leaving without Tina.”

“She’s not here,” Pederson said, “and I wouldn’t let you near her if she was!”

She snarled wordlessly.

“You’re lying,” Jonas said.

Pederson rounded and glared at him.

Jonas shrugged. “I saw her outside with Loco.”

Pederson snarled wordlessly. “I told him to keep her away from here! I’ll gut the bastard, I’ll—”

Chris finally caught up. “She’s here, now?”

Jonas nodded.

"I'm taking her with me."

"No!" Pederson snapped.

"No," Jonas agreed, ignoring Chris' splutters. "She's an Alley Dog now. Her alpha speaks for her as he speaks for all his pack. It's our way, Chris, he's within his rights."

Shock slammed through her like a physical blow. "You infected her..."

Pederson smiled nastily.

It was too much. She didn't hear herself howl, but she did hear her passenger's scream of fury in the back of her head. Rage flooded through her and she launched herself at Pederson. They crashed to the ground with her on top. Her passenger goaded her on, snarling in hate and fury. Heat flooded through her, but she was too busy trying to throttle Pederson to worry or even notice.

**His throat, rip his throat! Quickly, before he Changes!**

She went for Pederson's throat. Howls not thoughts filled her head. There was nothing but raw fury and bloodlust; if there had been, she wouldn't have tried it, not with her teeth. Even as she struck, a kick landed hard against her ribs and threw her clear. She felt a rib snap, but she went with the blow and rolled to her feet with no wasted time or motions. Still crouching ready to spring, she flexed her claws and screamed in fury. The pain in her hands and fingers made the sound spiral into a howl that shocked everyone into silence. Jonas stood squarely between her and Pederson. He was the one who had kicked her off him.

"Don't let her out here, Chris, anywhere but here. Think of the ocean, the sound it makes on the shore. Take a deep breath and try to calm down. Think about how blue it is, and—"

**Don't listen. They hurt Tina.**

She shook her head, listening to the soothing words and trying to think, but the pain in her hands was distracting. Knife-sharp claws slid in and out of the sheaths her fingers had

become. They weren't the blunt claws of a wolf; they looked like the claws the Tolliday girl had grown that day at Area 51. Only cats had retractable claws, what was happening?

She flexed her hands and the claws sprang out like five flick knives grafted to her fingers. The movement hurt, and she felt her eyes burning with the need to cry. She blinked, trying to focus, but there was something wrong with her eyes too. Everything was sharper and clearer, but color was absent—replaced by shades of grey and black. She had never realized there were so many kinds of black.

There was movement behind Jonas. Pederson had regained his feet while she struggled with the changes in herself. Just the sight of him blew Jonas' warnings out of her head. With a howl, she let the Change take her.

**At last!**

Chris shrieked in agony as her bones dislocated, and her body writhed into the change. She was lost in the burning agony as her muscles stretched and tore, only to re-knit themselves moments later into new patterns. She fell forward onto all fours shrieking her throat raw. She struggled out of her coat, and ripped demonically at her clothes with her claws. She screamed as her face erupted into a muzzle filled with sharp teeth. She screamed as her feet exploded out of her shoes. Her jeans bulged and caused her even more pain before they too succumbed to her changed body. Her stomach shifted, and her heart thundered as it moved to accommodate her new physique. Her kidneys, her liver—everything was moving and burning. Fur covered her in seconds and her ears lengthened. She howled like the animal she was, an animal in pain. Claws scrabbled desperately at concrete trying to find purchase.

"Help me!" she screamed.

She shredded what was left of her shirt with her fore claws, and snarled as she scented someone standing over her. It was Jonas. He said something, and waved everyone back.

"...first Change... going all the way... the wolves..."

Jonas said, his words only dimly understood.

Chris Humber's bright blue eyes slowly dulled. Smoke's yellow eyes, a wolf's eyes, blinked once up at Jonas before she scrambled to all fours. She panted away the heat of the Change and looked around for her enemy, but she couldn't see him. A solid wall of shifters surrounded her. All were wolves. They watched her silently, ready to attack or defend. She yearned to join them, but she feared them at the same time. They were not her pack; she was vulnerable and alone. She paced back and forth in agitation, not sure what to do. She wanted to hunt, needed to, but they wouldn't let her. She was sure they wouldn't let her have Pederson.

She looked up at Jonas where he towered over her. He made no threatening moves toward her, but he had changed into his half-coyote form. He wasn't her kind, but he was familiar, and that felt reassuring to her among all the strangeness. She circled him snuffing at his legs, gathering his scent, and trying to think.

Smoke shook herself and tried to think like the hunter she was. There were too many to fight, so that meant she should run, but she didn't think they would let her do that either. She looked around for Stephen, and found him after a moment of checking for his scent. He was just outside the ring of watchers looking in. She trotted toward him, but stopped when the watchers tensed. Some of them began the Change and she backed up. She looked back at Jonas and whined in frustration. What did they want her to do? They would not let her fight, and they would not let her flee. What was left?

"She ready," Jonas said.

Smoke backed up in alarm as every single one of the watchers howled and went to all fours. She cowered back as they threw themselves eagerly into the Change. Screams of pain and howls of exultation erupted all around her. She braced herself for the attack she knew was coming, but it didn't come. Instead of pain, they gave her hope. The ring of watchers disintegrated as she watched, and reformed into a

corridor leading toward that inviting slash of night glimpsed through the partly open doors.

"Run," Jonas hissed.

In a scrabble of claws, she launched herself into an all-out run. The watchers were a blur in the periphery of her vision as she made for the imagined safety of the night.

**Just let me get outside under the stars, just let me put a little distance between us, and I'll lose them.**

Smoke almost didn't recognize the people entering the hangar as she approached the doors. She was running so fast, so intent upon that cool and inviting darkness outside, that she was level with them before their features registered; Ronnie, and Lawrence, and... Flint! Flint was here, and entering just behind her was Barrows.

Smoke's eyes met Lephmann's for a timeless instant, and recognition flashed upon his face. He yelled something, but it was lost in the wind of her passage out the door.

The night enveloped her as she dashed between parked cars. Without slowing, she leapt over one and chose a westerly direction. The open desert beckoned. The night was dark, but the stars and moon gave her more than enough light. She was a wolf, not a pathetic near-blind human. She raced across the cracked pavement of the abandoned runways and finally onto the sandy soil of scrubland.

She settled into a ground-eating lope that she could maintain all night if necessary, and turned her thoughts to what was happening behind her. Why had they let her run? She doubted they planned to let her go. She listened hard to the wind, and thought she heard the howls of pursuers. She increased her speed wishing Jonas were here. He could have told her what this was about. Was it one of their status games? If it was a game, it was one she planned to win.

She changed direction and followed a stony ridge for a few miles, before abandoning it for the scrub again. She was hoping the stone might confuse those chasing her, and keeping to the patchy scrub offered some concealment. Her

tongue lolled out of her mouth, and she was panting in need of a drink, but she was far from exhausted. She was strong, much stronger than Chris was.

She yelped in surprise as someone crashed into her, bowling her head over tail off her feet. She sprang back up in time to meet another bitch running full tilt toward her. She met the charge and they slammed together chest to chest. As quick as lightning, Smoke snapped her jaws shut on her enemy's ear. She grinned, savagely pleased to hear the yelps of pain, and taste the sweetness of her enemy's blood.

"You rag-eared bitch, I'm going to kill you for that!"

Smoke leapt away laughing. The language of wolves was a joy to hear, even if in the mouth of an enemy. "Who do you think you're calling rag-eared? Take a look in a mirror why don't you?"

The bitch sprang at her again, but this time she was ready. Smoke met her enemy in mid-leap and clamped her jaws on her throat. They crashed to the ground together, the bitch frenziedly trying to break Smoke's hold. She held on and increased the pressure. A few seconds later it was over.

"I submit," the bitch said humbly.

"Sensible of you," Smoke said, backing away to give her room to rise. "I am Smoke. Your name?"

"Sweetsong." She growled when Smoke laughed. "Laugh at me again, and I'll see the color of your blood!"

Mindful of Sweetsong's injured dignity, Smoke was careful with her next words. "Why for? It's the same color as your own. What pack do you call home?"

"Not Alley Dog, if that is what you fear."

Smoke cocked her head. "Fear?"

"I mis-spoke," Sweetsong said quickly then added proudly, "the Rock Biters is my pack. Our range is the Apple Valley near Victorville."

Smoke looked around suspiciously and listened for the sound of her pursuers, but there was nothing. If a youngling such as Sweetsong could find her so easily, she knew Pederson

could. She should leave, but she had questions for Sweetsong. The bitch was very young, yet she had tracked her almost too easily. How?

“You are the first to find me. How?”

Sweetsong held herself proudly. “I did not chase you like the others. They’re bigger and stronger, but I’m quick and cleverer than they! I knew you would circle back, so I came here to wait.”

“How did you know?” Smoke asked, growling at the thought that she might be so easy to anticipate.

“Simple. You want the new Alley Dog and she’s at the base.”

“So,” Smoke said feeling a grudging respect for the youngling. She turned to leave, but stopped and looked back. “You will not hunt me.”

“My hunt is done,” Sweetsong agreed and Smoke trotted away into the night.

\* \* \*

## Smoke

David hurriedly undressed while listening to Stephen's account of what had happened. Barrows and Flint had cornered Stephen the moment David told them it was Chris they saw fleeing the hanger. They had assumed, quite rightly, that if anyone knew what was going on, Stephen would.

His thoughts turned worriedly to Chris. She must be confused about what was happening. The first Change was always hard, but this time would be much worse. It should have taken place at Sanctuary with friends around her, not in a stinking desert surrounded by vindictive females. Even now, she was out there fighting for life and position without the benefit of his instruction. He was a damn fool. He should have forced her to come with him that time in the hospital. Geoffrey was right; he was getting too soft. It was time he asserted his position again.

He handed his clothes to Ronnie.

She took the bundle unhappily. "Why me?"

"I have Geoffrey and Lawrence for muscle. I don't need you for that. I do need you to keep an eye on Barrows and Flint. They make me uneasy; OSI is trouble, Ronnie. You

know what they tried to do to Stephen that time.”

Ronnie nodded reluctantly and went to collect Geoffrey's and Lawrence's clothes.

Agent Barrows would bear watching, David mused. As for Flint, she was a big surprise, but a heartening one. That the government had chosen to give someone like her a position in the FBI, even a clandestine one in OSI, was a big step. He wondered if there might be others. Probably there were, and he unaware of it until now. He would have to look into the matter, but first he had to deal with Chris.

Geoffrey was already making the Change. Lawrence wasn't far behind him. David waited a little longer to hear the rest of Stephen's account, but was again distracted, this time by Jonas.

“This is wrong,” Jonas said. “You have no right to interfere in the ritual.”

“Will you try to stop me?” he asked, and Jonas looked uneasy. “I didn't think so. I'm surprised at you, Jonas. I always thought of you as an intelligent man, but this...”

“What else could I do? It's her first Change. She shouldn't have come out here on the full moon dammit! Our laws are clear, David, you shouldn't interfere.”

“The first hunt is custom, not law.”

“But still important,” Jonas argued.

“Not as important as her life.”

“They won't kill her.”

David nodded. “I'll make certain they don't.”

“They won't.”

The ritual hunt was usually restricted to a few females chosen by a pack's alphas. The whole point of the first hunt was to test a new recruit's skills and strength, not kill her. But this time, dozens of packs were involved and all the females had gone after Chris. None would intentionally kill her, but accidents happened in the heat of battle, and Chris didn't know they were only testing her. She would fight as if her life depended on it, which it well might considering how many

would attack.

“...agreed to do the interviews,” Stephen was saying. “Raymond refused to let her see Miss Rowe, and she became angry. That’s when the Change came upon her. The rest you know.”

David joined Stephen. “Chris agreed to our plan?” He ignored the look Barrows and Flint gave him. He had gotten over the modesty thing years ago.

Stephen nodded. “For a small favor from me.”

“What favor?” Barrows asked.

Stephen ignored the interruption. “You’re going after her?”

David nodded. “This is all wrong, Stephen. Her first Change should have been handled better than this. I’m leaving Ronnie behind to discuss things with you. She knows as much as I do. I need one of your men to meet us with a car.”

“Not a problem. Will Charles do?”

“Perfect. I was hoping you would offer.”

Stephen smiled good-naturedly. “Yes, you and he do get along well. Where do you want him to meet you?”

David glanced at Barrows who was watching suspiciously. “Never mind. I’ll give Charles the directions privately.”

Stephen nodded and beckoned to one of his bodyguards. “Charles, go with David. You will take his orders.”

“Yes, Stephen.” Charles followed David outside. “Limo or four-by-four?”

David frowned. “Use one of the four-by-fours. I’ll need you on the road into Victorville. Pick us up at the abandoned gas station. Do you know it?”

“I know it. When?”

“If I find her quickly, maybe an hour. If not, it could be longer. Give me until three o’clock. If I’m not there by then, go back to the club and report to Stephen. I don’t want you risking the sun for me.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

David smiled at the lie. “Thanks.”

Charles nodded and went to get the car.

Farris and Zelus waited impatiently for David to make the Change, their eyes fixed on him awaiting the command to hunt. Lawrence and Geoffrey were impressive in full wolf form. They were strong and in their primes. Zelus was already alpha of his own pack, but Farris had chosen not to go that route. Lawrence had explained that neither of them felt the need to lead a pack. They were satisfied with being David's second, which was unusual in any shifter. Their beasts tended to push them into confrontations in an effort to assert dominance.

David was grateful that Farris felt at ease with the situation. Lawrence had been with him from the beginning, and was one of his best friends.

**Are you ready?**

David took a deep breath. "Let's make this a fast one."

**You are sure?**

David tensed and nodded jerkily.

In a savage rush of heat and blinding pain, Mist triggered the Change. It was a vicious explosion of muscle tearing agony, and it was over in seconds, but for all of that, it was more shocking and painful than the more leisurely process. David's scream was still echoing in the air when Mist appeared fully formed in his place. He shook himself and panted away some of the excess heat the Change caused.

Farris and Zelus were watching him with their tails between their legs in sympathy. They knew how much a fast Change hurt, and how strong one had to be to endure it.

Mist looked into their eyes and said, "Let us hunt."

\* \* \*

Smoke yelped as her enemy bit her leg. She kicked and scrambled free, but she was hurt. Blood slicked her fur in a dozen places and she was tiring. How many had she fought now? A dozen, two dozen? It didn't matter. She would go

down fighting. It was not in her nature to give up.

She watched her enemy stalk arrogantly toward her. She was a cunning fighter this one. The others had caused her only a little difficulty in comparison. She edged back, turning to keep her bad leg away from those jaws. Already it felt much better, but it was not yet completely well.

“I will kill you.”

Smoke was sure that was her intention. “I’ll not let you.”

“I give you no choice. You won’t take my place.”

“I don’t want your place.”

“Fool. You expect me to believe that?”

Smoke made a feint for her enemy’s throat, but her jaws snapped closed on her ruff at the last moment. With a heave born of desperation, she threw herself to the ground, dragging the other bitch down with her, but she lost her grip when they landed and had to roll clear. They scrambled back to their feet, neither of them gaining an advantage. They were both bleeding now.

“I don’t care what you believe.” She circled her opponent. Her leg felt much better than it had, and her confidence improved. “I don’t know what pack you think I want to join.”

“Fool. You aim far above yourself. The Alley Dogs will not have you, and Raymond is mine.”

Anger rumbled in her throat at the insult. “You should rename your pack Smelly Dogs!”

She leapt upon the Alley Dog’s back tearing and clawing at her for all she was worth. She bit her neck and shoulders, but was thrown clear again. She landed on her feet ready for a charge, and managed to fend the Alley Dog off when it came, but it was a close thing. She came away from the brief but ferocious encounter with her face smarting, and blood running into her left eye. She shook her head ignoring the blood flying through the air. They equaled each other in size and strength... but not in cleverness, she decided.

Smoke turned and ran.

The Alley Dog yelped in surprise and gave chase.

Smoke forced herself to keep running while she concentrated on the change she desperately needed to survive. She thought of Jonas, how he had towered over Chris full of menace and power. That's what she needed now. She was strong, but only alphas had such control over the Change. There was no time for doubts or hesitation. She concentrated on the way Jonas had looked when Chris first met him, but he was coyote not wolf.

Nothing happened.

The memory of Ryder's half-wolf form came to her rescue. A wave of heat flooded her body and she began to shift shape. The pain was a spur to speed, but her changed body betrayed her at the last. Her legs lost their rhythm as muscles and flesh stretched and reformed in mid-flight. She howled and tumbled into a pain-filled heap, but the Change was complete. She pushed painfully to her feet and turned just in time to bury her newly clawed hands in the Alley Dog's chest.

The Alley Dog screamed in shock.

It wasn't a wolf's howl. It was a child's scream of anguish loud enough to shock into stillness everyone within miles, but Smoke was beyond caring about stealth. The pain of her desperate change had yet to fade as she drove her claws deep, reaching for her enemy's heart. Her hand closed around it and she squeezed. The Alley Dog stiffened and jerked trying desperately to live. Smoke ripped the Alley Dog's heart out and let her carcass fall.

Smoke towered over her enemy's fallen body and howled in triumph. "*Aaaroooooh! Aaaroooooooh!*"

She licked the blood from the still steaming heart in her fist. It was all the sweeter for being that of her enemy. She was so hungry that she felt hollow inside... she cocked her head and listened intently. Someone was coming. Quickly losing interest in the face of a new threat, she dropped the heart and crouched beside the slowly cooling carcass. It had changed back to the form of a woman. She studied the face,

oddly cheered when she did not recognize it. The grey eyes, clouded with death, stared at her accusingly. She looked away and turned her attention back to the game.

There was more than one of them this time. She was strong, but three at once was pushing it. Keeping low, she ran in a crouch away from where she sensed the enemy came, and straight into a trap. She reared back, trying to avoid the claws she was sure were coming, but the wolf just watched her calmly.

"Do you know me?" he asked, his head cocked quizzically.

Smoke's eyes narrowed. He was a fine and strong-looking male, but not in the least ready for a fight. He was calm, and somehow familiar.

"You still smell nice... Farris is it?"

"I am Farris," he agreed. "Those behind you are Mist and Zelus. We are here to help you."

She turned to find a pair of wolves watching her. Fine looking males, all. "How can you help me? Will you fight by my side?"

Mist trotted forward. "We will lead you away to safety. We have a car waiting for us."

"I go to the base."

"You must not do that."

Smoke growled. "Don't tell me what I must do. I came here for Tina. I'm not leaving without her."

"It's too late. She left with Loco."

Smoke snarled and clawed the ground in frustration. "I will follow them."

"It's too late I said!" Mist said, angry with her rebellion. "They left right after you Changed. They're long gone."

"Long gone," Zelus agreed, "but not forever. You will see Pederson again. I guarantee you that."

Smoke stilled. "Why?"

"You killed his mate back there. You didn't know?"

"No. She tried to kill me. She was afraid I wanted to take

her place.”

Zelus slumped to the ground and scratched an itch behind his ear. “You won. Her place is now yours if you want to claim it. Do you?”

“No. The Alley Dogs will never be my pack, and Pederson will answer for what he did to Tina.”

“Loco bit her, not Pederson.”

“Then Loco will answer,” Smoke said, but she doubted Pederson would stand by and let her have Loco. She would have to fight him too, and any in his pack that stood with him. “I will come with you... for now.”

“Good decision,” Mist said satisfaction evident in his body language. “Change back to your wolf form and follow me.”

Smoke lay hidden in the scrub with Mist at the side of the road while Farris scouted the abandoned gas station. The tumbled down building seemed deserted from this distance, but they were taking no chances. She hadn't had to fight since joining Mist and his brothers, but that wasn't the same as being safe. They had been pursued—closely pursued on occasion—but Mist's cleverness had seen them through each time. She had enjoyed the merry chase they had led the hunters on, but she had to admit she was glad now that it was almost over. Running with other wolves was like having her own pack; it was a fine feeling, but it was one that would not last. She was alone and had to remember that. Mist and Lephmann were inseparable, just as Chris was inseparable from her. When Mist Changed, she would have to deal with Lephmann—a man she knew wanted to use her for his own ends. She dared not get too comfortable with him or those he ruled. It was a shame. Farris would have made a fine mate, and although she knew Chris would disagree, Lawrence would have been good for her.

Mist suddenly stood. “Here they come.”

Smoke watched the manthing—a shiny black SUV—approach along the road. She recognized Lawrence in the

passenger seat, but not the driver. They stopped and Lawrence climbed out opposite her hiding place. He opened the tailgate and gestured urgently.

Mist looked down at her. "You go first. Zelus and I will cover you."

Smoke rose smoothly to her feet and dashed for the safety of the SUV. She leapt in the back and turned to watch Mist and Zelus. Mist trotted toward her while Zelus stood between him and the danger prowling the desert. Mist joined her in the back and Lawrence slammed the tailgate closed. Only then did Zelus Change and join Lawrence up front.

"We should Change." Not waiting for an answer, Mist triggered the Change.

Smoke considered the situation, not sure she wanted to make the Change just yet. While she hesitated, the car did a U-turn and accelerated quickly along the road back toward the city. She turned on the spot a few times, slumped down, and rested her head on her paws. She had much to consider, and anyway, following Lephmann's orders didn't sit well with her. She decided to Change when they reached the city and its sometimes-overwhelming stink of manthings. She was more than happy to let Chris deal with that. She wondered what Chris would do when she realized Tina was still with Loco. A rumble of anger worked its way up from her chest just thinking about it.

"Suit yourself." Lephmann settled himself more comfortably and turned to Geoffrey. "Damage assessment?"

"Nothing much. She only killed one of them and Jonas will clean that up. She'll have to watch her back with the Alley Dogs from now on, but that was already true. So will you for taking her side."

Lephmann pursed his lips. "I doubt my stock could get any lower where Pederson is concerned."

Lawrence snorted. "Want a bet? Our problems with Pederson were purely business, but now its personal. He didn't love her, but she was still his mate and alpha to his pack. He

can't let it go, David. You know that."

Smoke closed her eyes, but she listened intently as Lephmann debated with his friends. He seemed to think the problem would blow over. She knew it wouldn't, especially not when he learned what she was going to do to Loco.

The lack of movement woke her. She had been dreaming that she was a wolf running through a desert landscape pursued by a faceless enemy...

Chris opened her eyes and groaned. Everything hurt. She looked around and found she was lying naked in the back of a car covered only by an itchy blanket. She clutched it tightly to her chest and sat up. Her joints popped audibly and she stifled another groan. She could hear voices outside. Before she could investigate, a shadow eclipsed the window and the tailgate opened.

"She's awake," Geoffrey said to someone out of view. He offered her his hand. "You're safe, Chris."

She didn't take it. "Where are we?"

"Lost Souls. You can come out now. You're safe."

*Safe?* She shook her head wearily. What was safe in this crazy world? "My clothes?"

"Come inside and I'll find you some."

Geoffrey stepped back to give her room, and she climbed out of the car. They were in the alley behind Lost Souls where tonight's journey had begun. Lawrence was standing next to an open door to the club. He was already dressed in a mis-matched jacket and trousers, but his feet were still bare. Geoffrey was naked and obviously didn't care who noticed. She averted her eyes and noticed the sky was getting lighter. The night was almost over. Geoffrey watched as she checked out her surroundings. He seemed to expect her to say something, but she didn't know what. He shrugged at her silence and went for the door. He whispered something to Lawrence then entered the club, leaving her to follow.

She clutched her blanket tighter. She needed something

to wear and a ride home. Her keys, John's badge, her gun... everything was in her coat, but it was lying discarded on the floor of the hangar.

*The hanger...*

Like an explosion in her head, the memories of what she had done swept her away. She stumbled and leaned against the wall next to the door. She remembered the fear and terror of the Change, and the blinding anger she had felt upon learning that Tina had been infected. Most of all, she remembered her exultation when she gripped her enemy's heart and ripped it still beating from her chest.

Lord and Lady, she was a monster. She had killed that woman without a moment's thought or hesitation, but worse than that, she had enjoyed it and would do it again given the opportunity. The taste of her enemy's blood and the smell of her fear had been intoxicating. Tears started in her eyes when she realized she would have eaten her victim's heart if there had been time.

She doubled over and heaved and retched until there was nothing left to bring up but bile, and still she heaved. Lawrence rubbed her back and comforted her as she shook from the force of her reaction.

"Its okay, it's okay. The first time is always the worst," Lawrence said, stroking her hair from her face.

She wanted to knock his hand away, but she needed the comfort of another's touch. "I killed her. I killed her and I don't even know her name! I have to turn myself in. I... I killed her and..."

"You're not turning yourself in. Smoke did what she had to do to survive, and Jonas will clean up. No one will blame you, Chris, don't worry about that."

"But I killed her. I'm a murderer."

Lawrence gripped her shoulders and forced her to face him. "No you're not. Listen to me... *listen!*" He punctuated his command by shaking her roughly. He stared into her bewildered eyes. "This is your world now, Chris. You have

got to learn to live in it. We deal with this sort of thing all the time. We don't go to the police, Chris. You should know by now they don't care what we do to each other. As long as we keep it low key and off the streets, they're happy."

She shook her head in denial. "I cared."

"If that's so, then you were one in a hundred that did. You're not turning yourself in. You were defending yourself, and that's how everyone that matters will see it."

"But Pederson, what about Pederson?"

Lawrence grimaced. "If only half of what I've heard about him and his mate is true, you actually did him a favor, but he'll lose the respect of his pack if he doesn't come after you. The Alley Dogs are your enemy now, but there are other packs. You need to find one willing to support you against them."

She nodded, but she didn't want anything to do with joining a pack. All she wanted to do was be a detective, but they wouldn't let her. All she knew how to be had been denied her. What was left?

*Nothing.*

"I want to go home," she said plaintively, her voice breaking as she tried to hold back her sobs, "t-take me home... s-someone take me home!"

Lawrence bit his lip and nodded. "Clothes first, Chris. Come on." He put a protective arm around her shoulders, and led her inside the club and up to Tansey's office. He walked her to the couch and made her sit. "Stay there. Don't move. Give me five minutes to find something for you to put on."

Chris slumped on the couch staring at her blood-caked hands in silence. The stain had dried black and reached almost to her right elbow. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut trying to blot it out, but that only made it worse. She saw again how easily her claws penetrated the wolf's chest, felt the heat of her enemy's blood, and the frantic fluttering of her heart as her hand closed around it. She gasped in horror and her eyes flew open.

**It was a good fight.**

“Your last. I’ll never let you out again.”

**What will you do when you find Loco, and what about Ryder and Pederson?**

“I’ll think of something. You’re a monster. I’ll never let you out. Never.”

Smoke howled with laughter and Chris cringed. It filled her head until she felt sure she would go mad. She clamped her hands over her ears, but of course it made no difference. Smoke was inside her, inside her and waiting to kill again.

“Here,” Lawrence said, offering some clothes.

She jumped; she hadn’t heard him enter. She ignored Smoke’s derision and whispered opinion of her ability to look after herself. No matter what Smoke said, no matter how she said it, she would not be fooled into the Change again.

She took the folded dress and stood to shake it out. It was a knee-length summer dress in blue cotton. Very light weight, and very sexy with a low square-cut neckline and thin shoulder straps. She shook her head. Trust a man to choose something like this.

“Danyelle’s?”

Lawrence shook his head. “Marie keeps a few things here. You’re closer to her size... she won’t mind if that’s what is worrying you.”

“It’s not that.” She shrugged feeling defensive. “I just like to know who I have to thank.”

Lawrence quirked an eyebrow. “I see,” he said, but by his tone he obviously didn’t. “Put it on, and I’ll drive you home.”

She flushed when she realized he wasn’t going to leave. She forced herself not to turn her back, and dropped the blanket. Her face heated at his appreciative look and she quickly stepped into the dress. It fit her to perfection. She pulled the thin straps over her shoulders and tried to reach the zipper.

“Let me,” Lawrence said and stepped behind her. Chris shivered at his touch on the bare skin of her back as he worked the zipper to close the dress. “There. It looks good on you.”

Blue was her color. Whether he had guessed, or whether he had simply grabbed whatever came to hand, she didn't know. She felt more self-conscious wearing the dress he had chosen, than she had wearing the blanket.

"Come on," Lawrence said, and ushered her toward the door. "I'll drive you home. I'll have someone bring your car over tomorrow."

"Can I wash up a little first?"

"Sorry, I didn't think. It's through there." He pointed to a door set in the office wall.

Chris investigated the door and found a small washroom beyond. She stared into the mirror, not liking what she saw in her reflection's eyes. She looked shell-shocked, just like some of the victims she had interviewed in her time. She scrubbed her hands and arms free of blood, and splashed water on her face. There wasn't much she could do about her hair. It was all tangles and dried blood. By the time she was finished, the washbasin had changed color from white to pink. She tried to wash it away, but only succeeded in making things worse.

Lawrence came in to see what was keeping her, and found her trying to obliterate the bloodstains. No matter how hard she tried, she could still see it and smell it.

"Leave it," he said and gently turned her toward the office.

"But..." she looked back at the bloodstains, "I made a mess."

"Leave it, Chris. Vampires run this place; you don't think a little blood will worry them do you?" He closed the washroom door firmly. "Come on, I'll drive you home."

"My keys... I left all my stuff at the base."

"Don't worry about that. I'm sure Jonas will take good care of anything valuable."

She bit her lip, just then remembering the disk in her coat pocket. She had to get that disk back! It was encrypted under her personal seal, but nothing was one hundred percent secure. All her contacts and research was on that disk. Names,

dates, contact numbers of her weasels... everything!

"How can I get in touch with Jonas?" she asked as they left the club. "I want to... I need to talk to him about the woman I killed."

Lawrence looked at her sharply. "I told you he would take care of all that. Forget about her."

"What was her name?"

"Why does it matter to you?"

"Shouldn't it? I should at least know the name of people I kill. Wouldn't you want to know?"

Lawrence frowned, but then he nodded. "Her name was Janine... Janine Duvitski. I'll give you a number where Jonas can be reached."

When Lawrence slowed the car and turned onto her street, Chris had to decide how to deal with the newsies. It was too early for her flesh and blood stalkers to be active, but their electronic henchmen didn't need sleep.

"Pull into the drive of number nine. I'll go over the back fence."

The muscles at Lawrence's jaw bunched. "You shouldn't have to do this to get into your own house."

"They'll give up eventually."

Lawrence parked. Clutching the piece of paper with Jonas' number on it, Chris opened the door and stepped out. She watched Lawrence back out onto the street and leave before heading for her neighbor's back yard. It was a matter of moments for her to leap over the garden gate. There were some advantages to being a shifter. She had lost a lot of weight over the last few weeks; she was very strong and agile now. A five-foot gate was nothing to her these days.

She landed on the other side and crouched among the shadows. If anyone saw her now, they would think she had turned thief. Her dress might raise a few eyebrows though. She followed the fence, and then hopped into the next yard. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the gloom, before heading for

her target. Her objective was the base unit for the automated hover cams and lights arrayed along her back fence. She found the thing easily, and yanked the power feed free. The status lights on it dimmed and flickered out. Without lights and the base unit to record what the cameras saw, it didn't matter if they detected her, but she was feeling vindictive. Lawrence was right; she shouldn't have to do this to enter her own home. She found each of the cameras sitting on their charging stations waiting to pounce, and smashed them with her fists. The pain was a welcome distraction from her thoughts, and smashing them was worth a little blood. Besides, she healed very fast these days.

She threw her broken trophies into her own yard, and followed them over the fence. As expected, no lights came on to spot her. She retrieved the evidence of her vandalism, and headed for the back of her house. Without her keys, she had no choice but to break a window, which she did with her fist and some cursing. She would need to have it fixed. She opened the door and dropped her prizes onto the growing pile.

"Welcome home," Agent Barrows said. He was sitting before her computer at the kitchen table as if he owned the room. "Close the door, we have a few things to talk over."

She hissed angrily and slammed it hard enough to crack the other pane in the door. "You had better have a warrant." She stalked around the table but halted when she found her computer switched on and displaying a password request. "In about five seconds, I'm going to rip your head off!"

Barrows smiled. "My friend might have something to say about that."

She spun as she detected movement behind her. She tensed as a figure came through the door from the living room with eyes that glowed green in the darkness.

"Hello, Chris," Flint said sadly.

Chris stared at Flint's eyes—the slit-pupiled eyes of a cat. "You can't be."

\* \* \*

## **Blackmail**

Chris backed away as Flint slinked into the kitchen. Her anger fled as she tried to fit this turn of events into her world. Flint was a shifter. With eyes like that, she was some kind of cat, but it didn't make sense! Shifters were never accepted into government agencies like the FBI. She tried to shake off her confusion, but she couldn't stop herself from staring at Flint's glowing eyes.

She remembered an encounter Flint had with a shifter at Area 51, and groaned. "Pussycat... he called you pussycat."

Flint smiled. "I thought you might guess my secret right there, but lucky for me, Ryder distracted you. Sharon nearly blew it for me outside the club, and during Sandy's interview you put the air conditioning on full blast. I thought I was going to freeze."

Chris backed, shaking her head. "I knew there was something not right about you. Ben Kirkwood knew what you are."

"Of course he did. He knew I was alpha from the moment I walked into his store. We can always tell, Chris, you should know that by now."

"Ben Kirkwood, the Tolliday girl... who else knows?"

"A few of the local shifters I've talked to about finding Ryder. I'm sorry he got you. If I'd been there, it wouldn't have happened."

"Yeah," she said bitterly. "I shouldn't have pissed you off."

Flint smiled sadly. "I shouldn't have let you."

"Does Ken know?"

"About me?"

Chris nodded.

"No. No one in your... in the police department knows."

Chris turned to Barrows. "Who are you people really? You're not feebies."

Barrows switched off the computer. "In case you were wondering, your password is intact. Agent Flint left your coat and other things in the living room."

She tried not to react, but her eyes darted to the drive slot of her computer. There was a disk inserted. She didn't need to guess which disk it was. She knew.

"Who are you people?"

"You already know. Do you want to see my identification?"

Barrows dug out his wallet and threw it to her. She flipped it open to reveal an FBI badge. "It's real; certainly more official than the one you're using these days, Chris."

She flinched at the reminder. Using John's badge to back up her false claim of being a police officer had seemed like a good idea, but now it felt stupid. She cringed when she realized just how stupid she must have looked. Tansey had known; he must have. Addressing her as Miss Humber all the time instead of lieutenant... Goddess, how he must have wanted to laugh. Anyone that could sense what she was would have known she had no right to call herself a police officer.

She closed the wallet and tossed it back to Barrows. "Anyone can carry a badge these days. I'm living proof it means squat."

"Bitterness is very unbecoming in a woman that can wear a dress like that so well."

She hissed in outrage, and her eyes blazed. "You break into my house, you try to hack my computer, and you have the gall to insult me to my face? *Get out!*"

Barrows remained seated. "I intended no insult, but we did break in. For that you have my apology. As for hacking your computer, it was simply a way to pass the time. As I said, your data is intact." He didn't sound happy about that, which cheered Chris a little. "There are things we need to discuss. Shall we do it here, or would you be more comfortable in the other room?"

"I have nothing to say to you."

"There is, of course, a third venue we could use. I'm sure Captain Stokes would be happy to lend us one of his interview rooms."

She scowled. She wouldn't let them humiliate her by taking her in like a criminal. "Other room."

She stalked into the living room, switching on the lights as she entered. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. Her coat had been tossed over the back of a chair. She dug into its pockets and found John's badge. She ignored the feel of the gun bumping her hand. Pointing that at Barrows would set Flint off for sure, and a bullet wouldn't stop her.

While Barrows and Flint found a place to sit, Chris carefully secured the black ribbon in its accustomed place around the badge, and put it back on the shelf next to John's picture where it belonged. Only then did she turn to face her *guests*.

She took a seat. "I want to know who I'm talking to, and don't give me that bullshit about being FBI." She waved a hand at Flint. "She's a shifter."

"So she is, but I am not," Barrows said. "Will you take my word if I tell you that Agent Flint is as much entitled to the title as I am?"

**Make him say it straight. We will know if he lies.**

She nodded; that was what she had been thinking. "That depends on whether or not I believe you're entitled to it,

Barrows. Say it straight. Tell me who you are and don't lie. I'll know if you do."

Barrows leaned forward and interlocked his fingers. "There is a department within the FBI, one of a few that were created to deal with specific threats. You don't need to know their names; only that they exist. They're small, employing highly specialized groups of agents. Flint and I belong to one such group."

"Give me a name."

"OSI, it stands for Office of Special Investigations. You won't find us listed in the directory. There is no number you can call to verify what I say. Flint and I are Special Agents working under the aegis of the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

There. He had said it straight out, and by the look on his face, he had done it that way on purpose. He was telling the truth, and knew that she knew he was. That there might be hidden departments within government agencies was hardly surprising, but that there were some employing non-humans was... at least it was a surprise to her. Maybe it shouldn't have been, maybe she was just naïve, but she didn't think so.

"OSI was set up to deal with shifter attacks?"

"No. OSI has been around in various forms pretty much since day one of the Bureau. There have always been cases that don't fit into neat categories—alien abductions, outbreaks of mysterious diseases, even people claiming to be able to read minds without using magic." Barrows smiled ruefully. "Alien abduction was a big part of our business at one time... the elves do like their little jokes."

She snorted. The elves *were* aliens as far as she was concerned; no human had a hope of understanding their motivations. Of course, they said the same kinds of things about humans. After all, they were around long before humans came on the scene. Maybe even before the dwarves, but the dwarves weren't saying. If anyone was alien they said, it was those short-lived pests calling themselves humans.

"Employing non-humans is a recent development,"

Barrows went on. "It's a natural progression really; using the paranormal to investigate the paranormal makes excellent sense. It should have happened a long time ago, but the political situation was never ready for it."

"But it is now?"

"We are an experiment," Flint said, sounding a touch bitter about it.

Chris raised an eyebrow. "We? There are others?"

Flint nodded. "Some, not many."

"Not yet, but their number will grow," Barrows said. "You must forgive Flint. She's under a great deal of pressure to perform. This thing with Ryder has put her and OSI in a bad light."

Chris stood and paced; it helped her think. She stopped by the window and twitched the curtain aside to look outside. The sun was barely up, but already the newsies were assembling. She watched them chatting and yawning together. She wondered when they would notice the missing cameras. Watching them yawning and drinking their breakfast coffee brought her tiredness surging to the fore. She felt a yawn gathering.

"I need a coffee. Want some?"

Barrows nodded. "Black, no sugar."

Flint stood. "I'll help."

Chris didn't need help, but she didn't refuse the offer. Once back in the kitchen she pointed to a cupboard and let Flint get the cups while she washed out the dregs of yesterday's coffee from the jug.

She couldn't help staring at Flint. "What's with the eyes?"

"Do they upset you?"

"Surprise me rather. What gives?"

"I see better in the dark like this. You'll notice the same thing if you try it."

Chris shivered remembering what she had already been through. She wanted nothing to do with the Change. "No thanks."

"We didn't want to spook you, so we left the lights off. I can change them back if they make you uncomfortable?"

"I would prefer it. Thanks."

"No problem." Flint let her eyes change back. "There. Better?"

"Didn't that hurt?"

"Of course, but you can get used to any amount of pain if it's necessary. After a while, you get to like it."

Chris' mouth worked but nothing came out. Lord and Lady, all shifters really were crazy. She remembered the tearing agony of the Change, and later the exultation of slaughtering her enemy. How long would it be before she was raving? How long before she began agreeing with Flint's crazy talk?

"Chris?"

Chris blinked and shook her head gently. "Sorry, I was thinking. How did you get infected?"

Flint placed the cups on the counter. "I was wondering when you would ask. I told Ken a part of this a few days after your attack."

"But you said he didn't know."

"He doesn't, not the part about me. I was a cop back east, Robbery Homicide. My partner and I were called out on a job. A bad one, lots of bodies. Anyway, one thing led another and we took out the bad guy. Afterward, we were trying to help some of the injured when Jess—my partner—stopped to help a guy. He was in a bad way, a goner for sure, or so we thought. He turned out to be a shifter. He woke up in a lot of pain and attacked her. It wasn't his fault. He was in pain and his beast just lashed out. Jess was infected and had to leave the department. A year later she committed suicide."

Faced with the exact same situation herself, Chris found it easy to imagine Jess' despair. She knew how tempting such a decision was.

"I'm sorry. Did she infect you?"

"No, she would never have hurt me that way. She wouldn't have wished her situation on her worst enemy, let alone me."

No, I wasn't attacked at all. You'll find this hard to believe, but I chose what I am."

Chris gaped. "You chose... *why?*"

"I was sick. Dying actually. All the doctors said I had a few months to live, a year at the most. We tried the usual things, magic, drugs... even that new thing. Ever heard of gene therapy?"

Chris filled the jug with water. "I've heard of it."

"Biggest load of crap I've ever seen or heard of, but the doctors thought it might work. The treatment is still new; it might work eventually, but it was useless where I was concerned. I would have been dead by the end of the year if I had waited, but after what happened to Jess I wasn't sure that being dead wouldn't be better. In the end I decided to take a chance. I figured I could always do what Jess did if it didn't work out."

Chris shrugged. "So you let someone bite you?"

"I decided that if I was going to share my body with something, I had a right to choose what it would be. I spent a lot of time researching shifters after I resigned—the different types, what each could and couldn't do... stuff like that. A lot of the pack leaders I contacted wouldn't have anything to do with me, but there were a few who were curious enough to talk to a lunatic human." Flint grinned and then shrugged. "I spent a lot of time traveling and talking to shifters, but then a time came when I was too sick to put it off any longer. I made my choice before it was too late."

"What was it? I know you're a cat of some kind."

"Leopard."

Chris nodded. A leopard suited Flint somehow. "So, you just went up to a wereleopard and asked her to bite you?"

"Him, but yes. I'd learned there's a lot I don't like about the way shifters live within a pack, so I decided not to join one. That meant I needed a beast that would be happy living alone, and natural leopards are solitary creatures. It seemed a logical choice, and leopards have a lot going for them. I

tracked down a rumor about a small pack of wereleopards, and persuaded their alpha to bite me. I had always planned to return home afterward, but I had some trouble sticking to the plan. Duncan warned me I would before he turned me, but I didn't listen to him. Jade doesn't like us living alone."

"Jade is...?"

Flint nodded. "My beast. I didn't bargain on there being a difference between natural leopards and wereleopards."

Chris shook her head. "That's damn sloppy thinking. You should have realized when you found Duncan leading a pack."

"I'm not a fool. Of course I thought of it, but you don't know Duncan. He's a lonely man, Chris. I assumed his pack was a way to alleviate that."

"There you go again... you assumed. A good investigator never assumes. You *know* that."

Flint sighed. "Yeah, I screwed up, but it really didn't matter in the end. It turns out that all shifters have an emotional need for a pack. It keeps us sane... well as sane as any shifter ever is."

That was something she did not want to hear. She didn't want to join a pack, and she certainly didn't want to jump through hoops keeping the local chuckleheads off her back. Smoke wouldn't tolerate anyone or anything pushing her around, and Chris was in complete agreement with her. In those kinds of situations, she was the pusher, not the pushee.

She poured the coffee, and together with Flint went back into the living room. Chris gave Barrows his cup and sat to drink her own. The three of them drank in silence, but then Barrows broke it by finishing his coffee first and putting his cup aside.

Barrows began the inquisition. "What was the favor the vampire promised you? I know he promised something."

Chris put her half-empty cup on the table. "It's not a secret. He promised to intervene for me with the Alley Dogs."

"And what did you have to promise in return?"

"I said I would help him counter AML's anti-amendment campaign with a few interviews."

Flint snorted. "Those lunatics. We should look into AML some time. I'm getting tired of cleaning up after them."

Barrows nodded thoughtfully, but then shrugged. "They're for later. Right now we have other things to do."

"About that," Chris said, "any word on Ryder?"

Flint glanced at Barrows before shaking her head.

Chris took note of Flint's hesitation. "What about Marty and Rebecca?"

Flint sighed. "Nothing. They've dropped off the face of the Earth."

"Is it possible they really did do that?"

"Go off world you mean?"

Chris nodded.

"Anything's possible, but it's not likely. We don't do well in zero gee, Chris. If they did somehow put up with it long enough to get where they're heading, they still have the Change to deal with. No, keeping it secret would be impossible."

She shuddered. Flint was right. Shifters trapped in the confines of a small ship didn't bear thinking about.

"I didn't come here to discuss Marty and Rebecca, Chris," Barrows said impatiently. "I came to ask you to work with Flint in her search for Ryder."

**We don't need the cat. We're better on our own.**

She frowned. *Shut up and listen, will you?*

"Anything you need, *anything at all*, just let me know, and I'll do my best to supply it. I want Ryder brought in. OSI places great importance on that. I do too."

He couldn't possibly want Ryder more than she did. "Let me be very clear, Barrows. Ryder nearly *killed* me, and he did screw up my life. I'll be honest and tell you right now: I don't give a damn about what you and OSI want. I'll find Ryder on my own without your help."

Barrows stared into Chris' eyes intently. "I thought that might be your answer, but consider this: Flint isn't the only

shifter at OSI. If I bring Ryder in, it will make certain people very happy with me. If that happens, I guarantee more slots for shifters will open up. Help me out, and your name could be at the top of the list.”

Her heart thumped hard in her chest and her hopes leapt. Barrows smiled at the pathetic hunger in her eyes. To carry a badge again... it was all she had ever wanted. The temptation to smile and agree to help him was strong, but anger at the way he was manipulating her burned in her guts. It was blackmail, pure and simple. She wasn't even sure he had the clout to do what he offered, let alone trust him enough to come through after she found Ryder for him.

**Don't trust him. You have me, you don't need them. Don't trust either of them.**

*Trust them? No, never that.*

They wanted to use her for their own purposes with never a thought for her good, just as Lephmann wanted to use her. And what of the vampire? It was strange to think, but she trusted Stephen more than she trusted these two. He was an undead monster, yet he had been completely open about his needs, and what he would give in exchange for her meeting them. What were things coming to when trusting one of the monsters over a human agent of the government—a government she had loyally served for years—was the right thing to do? Lord and Lady, she must be mad.

She was throwing away her last chance at a life. She swallowed a whimper at the realization, and said in a low voice, “No deal.”

Barrows blinked. “You don't mean that, Chris. I know you want what I'm offering. Think about it. Just think for a minute. You could be back doing what you love this time next month.”

“Don't play me, you son of a bitch,” she growled, and Flint nodded slightly in approval. “I'm too honest, or maybe I'm just too stupid to accept your deal.”

Barrows rose stiffly to his feet. “That's your final word?”

“You bet it is, and the next time you try to blackmail me, I’ll rip your gizzard out. You can leave now.”

She escorted them to the front door and let them out. The newsies saw them, and rushed forward to question Barrows. He ignored them, and Flint forced a path through the crowd to their car. Barrows looked angry, but whatever he was saying to Flint was like water off a duck’s back. She simply shrugged, made eye contact with Chris for a second or two, and then climbed into the car. It peeled away from the curb in a cloud of tire smoke. The newsies wheeled upon Chris. She smiled in welcome as they rushed toward her then slammed the door in their faces.

\* \* \*

## Death Threat

Chris awoke from her nightmare, looking wildly around unsure of where she was. When she recognized the dim bedroom as being hers, she sighed in relief and slumped back onto the bed. She had been dreaming of her fight with Janine Duvitski again, but this time it was Janine that won. She had awoken just as Janine plunged her claws into her chest. She could still feel the pain as Janine's fist closed around her heart...

She buried her face in the pillow to soak up her tears, but that only made them worse. Mark's scent still lingered. The knowledge that she would never see him again made her tears flow harder. She clutched the pillow and cried silently.

**Oh please... he wasn't worthy of us.**

"What the hell do you know about it?" she snarled, her words muffled by the pillow. "He left me before you arrived. He left me *because* you arrived!"

**I know what you know.**

"What's that supposed to mean?"

**It means what it means. You blind yourself to his weakness, but I do not. I see him for what he is in your memories of him. He is a spineless human not even worthy**

**of speaking our names. Such a fool could never be our mate.**

Chris rolled onto her back. Her eyes were suddenly dry. "You can't blame him for leaving."

**Can I not? You do.**

She did, but she wouldn't admit that to Smoke. It didn't matter. The wolf was in her head and knew her thoughts. She kicked the covers off the bed, and swung her legs over the side. The light leaking in through the curtains had an orange cast to it. She checked the time and swore when she realized it was late afternoon. She had slept most of the day away.

She padded across the room, not caring that she was naked; there was no one to see. Her face heated and she shivered deliciously when she remembered Lawrence's eyes lingering on her body last night. There was no mistaking his interest in her, but she wasn't looking for another relationship; not this soon, and certainly not with one of the monsters.

She headed for the bathroom to take a shower, and tripped over Marie's dress lying in the doorway. She had been so tired after Flint left that she had simply stripped, showered, and fallen into bed naked. She picked up the dress, and promised herself she would get it cleaned before returning it. Before hanging it up in her wardrobe to let the wrinkles fall out of it, she buried her face in its folds. Smoke's scent was strong on the dress, mixed with the unmistakable maleness of Farris.

Smoke growled her approval. **He is a strong male. Not as clever as Mist maybe, but bigger than him and more caring than Zelus. He would make a fine mate for our cubs.**

"I told you last night. I won't talk to you about this."

**Lawrence is much bigger than Mark. I know you like the big ones.**

Chris spluttered, "If I did, *if* I did like the big ones, I wouldn't have agreed to marry Mark, now would I?"

**Would you not?**

She scowled and slammed the wardrobe door shut. "That's no answer."

Smoke was amused. **Why did you agree to be his mate then? Weak as you were without me, still he was not worthy of you.**

She sighed. "I did love him. There's more to love than bodies, Smoke. If you know my mind and can see my memories as you claim, then you know that I did love him. As for his worthiness, who is to say I was worthy of him? We loved each other as humans do, but then you came between us and ended it. That's all there is to it."

Chris stepped into the shower and turned the water on very hot. "Are you sulking?"

There was no response, and she smiled into the spray before reaching for the shampoo.

After washing and dressing, Chris spent some time with her computer in the kitchen. When she checked log-on times, she found Barrows had not lied about getting into her data. She had no doubt that he would have gotten in eventually, but she had arrived home before he could. That was one worry laid to rest. She sipped her coffee and tried to plan her investigation. Not having access to her usual resources would make her task harder, but not impossible.

She felt pulled in a dozen different directions at once. There was finding Ryder, which probably wouldn't happen unless she first found either Marty and Rebecca or their friend Jason Kirkwood. There was Tina to think about, as well as finding Trigger and Cruz before they got dead. Then there was the situation with Pederson and his Alley Dogs...

She shook her head.

She had too many things to do, and not enough time to do them. She needed to prioritize. She put her cup down and found some paper. With a frown, she put finding Tina at the top of her list. Tina was the only one that she considered an innocent in all of this, so she had to come first. The list grew quickly.

*Help Tina*  
*Find Jason Kirkwood... how?*  
*Martin Preston and Rebecca Cairns. Where are*  
*they?*  
*Kill Ryder*  
*Find Trigger and Cruz... talk to Jonas about Alley*  
*Dogs.*  
*Kill Loco for infecting Tina.*  
*Kill Pederson ???*

She sat back and stared at her list in an appalled silence. Half the items on it were murders she planned to commit. Lord and Lady, she was cracked. She had finally gone over the edge. She crumpled the list into a ball and threw it to land on top of the newspaper clippings. She couldn't go around killing people... she wouldn't let herself become what she had hunted all these years. She might not have a badge anymore, but she was still one of the good guys.

**A good list... and wolves do not sulk.**

She snorted. Considering the mayhem it would cause if she did try to follow through on her murder list, she wasn't surprised that Smoke liked it. She frowned and smoothed it flat again. Okay, she couldn't kill them, but she could still find them and hand them over to Ken. Maybe that would be enough.

**You know it won't be. Think about Ryder, think about Tina, and then say you will be satisfied.**

She clenched her teeth to stop herself from snarling something hateful at Smoke. Tina's name was enough to fill her with a righteous fury, and as for Ryder—there wasn't a word strong enough to describe what she felt when she thought of him. Nothing but Ryder dead at her feet would satisfy her. She didn't like that knowledge, didn't like how easy the thought of killing was these days, but that's the way she felt. She laid the blame for that squarely at Smoke's feet.

She studied the list again. Tina was at the top, but if she

was honest with herself, she didn't know how to help the girl. How could she hope to advise Tina when she couldn't even help herself?

She sighed and stared glumly at the blank screen of her computer. Her gaze wandered and came to rest on the newspaper clippings she had collected. She sifted through them, noting the by lines. Ed Davis was the author of the better ones, the ones she recognized as having their facts right. She might not have liked him very much, but she couldn't deny he was good at his job. He had been first on the scene of Vincent's murder for instance, and he had turned up at J-bone's building almost on her heels. Baxter had complained to her more than once about how Davis seemed to be a step ahead of him...

She stiffened, stunned by the implications. "Lord and Lady, *that's it!*"

It was so simple that none of them had seen it. Ken had long since stopped listening to her bitching about newsies, and Dave knew she had a history with Ed. It hadn't occurred to any of them that Ryder might know about it too... she frowned. That didn't make sense. Why would Ryder care one way or the other? She snorted; while she was asking impossible questions she might as well ask why he wanted publicity at all. Dave's theory was as good as any other on that score, though she didn't buy it herself. AML sympathizer's tended to prefer a low profile and always stayed clear of the media. It didn't matter to her that Ryder might have belonged to AML before he was infected with lycanthropy. He was as good as dead either way.

She reached for her link, intending to call Davis, but the doorbell chose that moment to chime. "Not again." When would those idiots learn she wasn't interested in giving interviews? The bell chimed again. "Yeah, yeah, I'm coming."

When she answered the door, she was surprised to find not one of the newsies, but Geoffrey. He had parked her crappy blue Honda in the street, and had come up to the house with

the keys. One of Geoffrey's friends was standing guard next to a flashy red sports car parked behind the Honda. The newsies were staying well clear of him. They had recognized Geoffrey because of his close association with Lephmann. They knew he was a shifter and they must have assumed his friend was one as well. They were right.

Chris took her keys. "Thanks. You want to come in for a minute?"

He shook his head. "Can't. Got a job for David that can't wait."

"Okay. Thanks for bringing my car."

"No prob." Geoffrey turned to leave, but he stopped and came back after only a few steps. "One thing you should know. Word is out that there's a price on your head."

Chris' jaw dropped. "You're kidding."

Geoffrey pointed at his lips. "Do you see me laughing? David is sending me and certain others to... *discourage* let's say, anyone from taking the Alley Dogs up on their offer."

"Is that the job you were talking about?"

Geoffrey nodded. "I wasn't supposed to tell you, but I figure you're safer knowing. Your best bet is to join a strong pack as fast as possible. It won't be easy finding one; not now the Alley Dogs have declared vengeance against you and anyone siding with you."

"I don't want to join a pack."

He shrugged. "Then don't." He abruptly changed the subject. "Say, what flowers do you like?"

"Huh?"

He waved a hand at her flowerbeds. "You've got a nice garden here. You like flowers right?"

She nodded. "I guess so, why?"

"Just wondering what to get for the funeral."

"You—" she stopped herself from saying what she thought of him. "You've got a pack with a vacancy I suppose?"

Geoffrey wouldn't meet her eyes. "I can't take you in, Chris."

That was a surprise. She had thought he was angling to recruit her. "You're afraid of Pederson."

He sneered. "Don't be insulting. The only thing that scares me is warm beer. I love a good fight, Chris, but this one might kill a lot of my pack brothers and sisters. I won't make this kind of decision for them... not without asking them first. Do you want me to?"

"No. I'll fight my own battles, but thanks."

Geoffrey nodded unhappily, but said nothing further. He went back to his car, and Chris went back inside.

"What do you think?"

**Make alliance against Pederson and kill him.**

She stepped into the kitchen and checked the time. It was almost six. "Alliance with who?"

**Pederson's second would be the best choice. Make a deal. You kill Pederson for him; he takes over the pack and orders them to leave us alone.**

"Trust you to resort to killing. I told you yesterday that I won't let you out again. I'm not going to kill anyone... well maybe Ryder, but no one else!"

Smoke howled with laughter. **You can't keep me locked away forever. Besides, you need me. What will you do when the Alley Dogs come for you, slap your thigh and say nice doggy?**

She scowled. "I'll think of something."

**I already have. Kill Pederson!**

"No," she snapped. "There must be another way."

She paced around the table and kicked the heap of broken hover cams. She would have to throw them outside. They were starting to take up too much room. She frowned and kicked them again. The pile shifted and collapsed a little more, with the cameras sliding and spreading out. She needed some advice. She checked the time again, but realized it would be at least another hour before Stephen was awake.

"Jonas," she said to herself. "I bet Jonas will have an idea."

**Jonas will agree with me.**

She shook her head. Where was the note Lawrence gave her? She frowned at the mess on the table and shuffled things around. She found it pushed part way under her computer and punched in the number on her link.

“McNally’s Doughnuts, the best in the valley. What can I getcha?”

She blinked and checked the number on her link’s display. It was right. “Jonas?”

“That’s me. Who is this?”

“Not one of your customers,” she said dryly. “It’s Chris Humber, you remember me?”

“As if I could forget. Where are you?” Jonas asked intently.

“My place.”

“Get out of there! Christ, girl, I thought you had some smarts. Raymond is gunning for you. Everyone knows where your place is. Go to ground before someone puts you six feet under it!”

**Jonas is right; we should leave this place.**

She hurried into the front room and peered outside. There were dozens of people hanging around, but they all had the familiar look of newsies. As far as she could tell, no one was out there that shouldn’t be.

“I need advice.”

“I just gave you some. Get out now!”

“I plan to, but first I need some information.”

Jonas hissed in frustration. “Make it fast, and then disappear. I ain’t kidding, girl. Raymond wants your head. Get that pretty butt of yours out of state... maybe out of the country.”

She snorted. “Not happening. Tell me how to end this without me getting dead or running out.” Jonas remained silent. Chris listened to his breathing, and wondered if maybe she should run after all. “Jonas?”

“Yeah, I’m thinking.”

"Think faster."

"Okay, listen. You won't get out of this without a fight. You up for that?"

She didn't want to fight, but that didn't mean she wasn't ready if it came to that. Smoke was always ready for mayhem. If knocking some young pup on her butt was what it would take to get this done with, she would do it.

"Yeah, if that's what it takes."

"It's that or run."

"I'm not running," she said in a hard voice. "I've got things to do here."

"I'll try to get the hit on you cancelled. Until I do, you're still a target. Find a hole and pull it in after you. Stay breathing and keep your link with you. I'll call when I know something."

Jonas broke the connection.

She listened to the dial tone for a second. "I hate it when people do that." She dropped the link into her pocket, and looked outside again.

She had to get out, and if she didn't want her place trashed she had to leave publicly. Besides, Jonas' urgency had given her the jitters. Waiting a few hours for dark didn't work for her. She stormed into her bedroom and grabbed a suitcase. She filled it with clothes, enough for a week, and threw her gun and spare magazines on top. As an afterthought, she folded Marie's dress and added it to the case.

In the kitchen, she collected her research, not caring that she crumpled her papers as she stuffed them into the case. The computer wouldn't fit; she would have to carry it. She threw on her coat, and stormed through the house like a whirlwind. She took the time to lock the door, and arm the alarm on the way out, before resolutely turning to face the mob of newsies. They bombarded her with questions as she forced a path toward her car.

"...your position?"

"Where are you going?"

“... president Mitchell... the debate?”

She loaded her things into the trunk of her car, and then turned to the newsies. She raised her hands for quiet. “I’m only going to say this once, so listen up. I’m leaving here for a couple of week’s vacation, so you all might as well go home. I won’t tell you where I’m going, so don’t ask.

“As for my position regarding the amendments, here it is: I’m all for them. I spent twelve years of my life serving this city, and upholding the laws of our state. I believe everyone, no matter his or her race, deserves equal protection under the law. I have always tried to be even-handed with humans and non-humans, and would like others to treat me the same way. The amendments could help to make my life worth living again. That’s all I have to say.”

“Miss Humber! One question...”

“...your response to Professor Goddard’s plan to tag non-humans...”

Chris ignored the questions and climbed behind the wheel of her car.

**Where are we going?**

“You’ll see when we get there,” she muttered. She started the car, and peeled away from the curb in a cloud of tire smoke.

\* \* \*

## **Taking Charge**

Chris stashed her car deep within a parking complex where it wouldn't give her away, and walked three blocks to Lost Souls. Walking the dingy streets of the Waterfront District that night, felt like the lowest point of her existence. She had let herself be forced out of her life almost completely. Leaving her home was like drawing a line under her past and starting fresh with nothing.

It was dark, the streets still wet from the earlier rain. Light from the occasional streetlight or passing car reflected off the puddles; somehow, that made the street feel even more deserted. The walls of the buildings were grimy with years of pollution and defaced with graffiti. The gangs used graffiti to claim territory and spread news. The walls of their neighborhoods were their bulletin boards. As she walked, she entertained herself by deciphering some of it.

It didn't matter whether a gang was human or non-human; they still had things in common. Things like tags and monikers. During her time on the streets, she had made it her business to learn which gang claimed what territory. She could read the signs as well as those that painted them. Being in the heart of Monster Central, most of the news had relevance

only to the monsters. A lot of the news was old and out of date. The most recent told her the Vice Kings had lost their turf war with the Counts. The Counts owned this street and those adjoining it. It made no difference to her why they were suddenly dissing the Vice Kings, but it did surprise her. They used to be allies.

**We are being stalked.**

She kept walking and under her breath said, "Are you sure?"

**Concentrate and you will hear them.**

She strained to pick up what Smoke was talking about, and thought she caught it briefly. She heard two pairs of stealthy feet trailing her. The urge to look behind her was almost overwhelming, but she mastered it.

"Two of them."

**Two behind, but how many ahead?**

She hadn't thought of that, but of course there might be more up ahead. The two behind were only following. They had yet to do anything, and that meant they were waiting for something. She tried to feel anything amiss, but learned nothing. She sniffed, trying to catch the scent of shifters passing this way. The air was damp; the occasional alley they passed was smelly but deserted. She couldn't tell if anyone had come this way recently. She thought not, but she might well be wrong. She was too new to all this stuff.

**Let me out.**

"No."

**You will kill us both with your fear!**

"I'm not afraid of you," she growled under her breath.

It was the truth. She wasn't afraid of Smoke, she was afraid of what Smoke would do. She couldn't get Janine's scream out of her head and didn't want to kill anyone else. She thought longingly of her gun in the suitcase. With that, she might scare away whoever was following her.

**I feel them. They're moving in for the kill. Let me out!**

"I'm not taking my clothes off in the middle of the street so you can go hunting. I'll fix this without killing."

**How?**

She looked around and found what she needed. It was a narrow alley, where, if she was lucky, only one of them could come at her at a time. She quickened her pace and ducked into it. She heard a faint cry of surprise and smiled grimly. She stashed her case and computer against the wall where they wouldn't get in her way, and put her back against the wall on the opposite side where the shadows were deepest.

"I need your eyes," she whispered. "Don't try anything. Eyes only."

Smoke snarled angrily. **You risk everything with your foolishness.**

"Eyes only," she said again.

She tried to will her eyes to change. The pain made her inhale sharply, and her vision blurred. Her eyes felt as if they were going to burst out of her head. Finally, her vision cleared and she blinked away stinging tears.

"I don't need you to make the Change," she whispered in surprise. She had assumed she needed Smoke to do it. "I can do it myself. Why didn't you tell me?"

Smoke remained stubbornly silent.

It had to be about control. Smoke wanted to be in control of the Change, but theirs was a partnership. Neither of them controlled the other fully. They both seemed to have the ability to bring on the Change. Like Smoke, Chris could do it by force of will, but Smoke could also use strong emotions like anger to trick her into it. That meant Smoke had an advantage, but it didn't mean she was stronger.

She frowned; she didn't think it did.

The wary shapes of two men eclipsed the dim light filtering into the mouth of the alley. Now that she had the eyes of a wolf, she could see them perfectly. They were shifters, but they hadn't made the Change yet. Her gun would not help her against them. She watched and listened to them whispering

together. Her lip curled when she realized they were trying to talk themselves into entering the alley. She supposed amateur hitmen were preferable to professionals, but she couldn't muster much enthusiasm. They were terrified of her; she could smell it on the dank air filtering along the alley. That realization cheered her no end.

Smoke dismissed their fears as merely her due.

"...knows we're coming... be ready for us."

"I need the money. You help me, or I swear I'll rip your head off!"

"She's alpha, can't you feel it?"

"I don't give a shit! There are two of us, we can take her."

"I don't know..."

"I do. Let's get this over with."

Chris watched them move warily along the alley. She slowed her breathing, and remained absolutely still. They couldn't see her, but although the alley stank, they would pick up her scent eventually. They knew she was here, but not precisely where. That was her only advantage. It was all she needed.

The leader of the two stepped one pace too close before he scented her presence. He tried to duck, but she was blindingly fast. She reached out, clamped a hand around his neck, and slammed him into the wall. He cried out in shock at her speed and strength, and tried to wrench himself free.

She felt blood welling over her fingers where his struggles had caused her nails to cut into him. She slammed him against the wall again to slow him down. His head struck the bricks hard, and his eyes glazed. Most of the fight went out of him. Smoke was growling and snarling, trying to give advice, but Chris didn't need help. She was doing all right on her own.

The knife slid into her back with hardly any resistance.

Fool that she was, she had ignored the second shifter—the cowardly one. His knife went into her back, and then a second time. She screamed in shock as the ice-cold sensation in her back suddenly erupted into a volcano of heat.

**Silver!**

She had no reason to doubt Smoke. The blade was made of silver to cause maximum damage. She convulsed in agony. Without willing it, her hand—the hand holding the captive shifter—changed. Razor sharp claws sprang from the tips of her fingers, and buried themselves in the struggling man's neck.

"No!" she screamed in horror as blood fountained into the air and over her.

The body was still falling as she turned in a rage upon her knife-wielding attacker. She grunted in shock as the knife punched into her belly over and over. He was so fast! She screamed and struck back. Her claws ripped into his face, and he reeled away from the force of the blow, but it was not enough to kill him. He came back at her, and she defended herself desperately with her bare hands. The knife was a blur as he slashed and thrust. She backed away, trying to anticipate his moves. Blood flew in all directions as she stumbled away from his ferocious attack. Her hands and forearms were cut to ribbons as she tried to protect her face and chest from the knife. An explosion of mind-numbing pain accompanied each cut.

**Let me out, let me out, let me out!**

"No!" she screamed and leapt upon the knife.

It slid into her body easily, but this time she clamped a hand around her attacker's wrist. The knife inside her felt like a fire stoked to life, but she wouldn't let him pull it out. She wanted to scream, she wanted to rip his face off, but instead she made herself look into his eyes and smile. He paled and shook in fear. He wrenched at the knife trying to pull it free, but despite the renewed agony his struggles caused, she wouldn't allow him to have it. The pain was building to a climax. The alley and the man's panicked breathing faded in and out of her awareness. He hammered at her with his free hand.

"Let me go," he pleaded. "Please let me go. I didn't want to do it... it was all Chico's idea. I swear I didn't mean it! Let

me go..."

"Let you go?" she asked vaguely. "Of course I will. Just let go of the knife, and I'll let you live."

Hope blossomed on the man's face, and he relaxed his grip.

Her fist was like a steel clamp around his wrist, and she carefully moved his hand away from the handle of the knife buried in her stomach. With a snarl of anger, she twisted sharply. The snapping of bone was loud enough to hear over his scream of anguish.

"Run away," she said sharply. "Before I let Smoke have you."

He didn't need telling twice. Cradling his shattered elbow, he ran up the alley and was gone.

**Take it out, take it out!** Smoke howled. **It hurts us, it burns us!**

Chris gripped the knife and tugged it free. She groaned and fell to her knees as blood gushed out. She clamped her hands over the wounds she could reach, and prayed that a shifter's vaunted ability to heal anything would come to her rescue.

Shifters were allergic to silver, and wounds caused by it took longer to heal... if they didn't kill the shifter first. She needed help badly. Blood was still pouring out of her back, and she couldn't reach the wounds to staunch them. The stab wounds in her belly weren't bleeding as much, but they hurt worse. She knew what kind of damage she had taken. She had seen enough victims of stabbings in her time, most of them on a slab in the morgue. She was bleeding internally.

She staggered to her feet, nearly tripping over the corpse of her attacker. Lord and Lady, she had killed him without a thought; killed him, not even on purpose but by accident! Two people had died at her hands now. She could blame Smoke for the first death, and did, but this one was all hers. She stared at the corpse trying to feel something—pity, remorse, anything. Was someone waiting for him to come home? Did he have a

wife, children? She didn't know anything about him, not even his name, and he was dead at her hands. She felt nothing for him at all. Even her guilt was self-centered. She wasn't even sure it was real. It felt vague, as if she felt guilty because a civilized person *should* feel that way, not because she actually did.

She weaved her way drunkenly along the alley. When she realized she was still clutching the bloody knife, she dropped it into her coat pocket. Her coat, and the shirt under it, were both shredded. Blood was still running down her arms and dripping onto the ground. Anyone who saw her now would run away screaming. Probably for the best, all things considered. She was dangerous; a dangerous animal. Isn't that what everyone thought when they bothered to think of shifters at all? Of course it was, and they were right. Five or six weeks as a shifter, and already she had murdered two people. What would her score be by the end of the year?

She wandered the streets in a daze. She didn't know where she was or where she was going. Forcing her legs to keep her upright and moving took all her attention. She was leaving a trail of blood a child could follow. She stopped to lean tiredly against a wall and looked back. There was nothing she could do about the blood trail. If someone wanted to follow it and finish her off, he was welcome to try. She was too exhausted to care. She pushed off from the wall not caring that she left a bloody palm print over a Vice Kings' tag. They would think a new gang had dissed them. She chuckled tiredly, and imagined some very puzzled gang bangers looking at her print.

Although she was aware of her surroundings, it was only a vague awareness. She had lost a lot of blood, and her steps became ever slower as time passed. If it hadn't been for Smoke keeping her on the right course, she would never have reached Lost Souls that night.

Walls covered in colorful graffiti came and went, cracked pavement under her feet, puddles full of shimmering light, blurry headlights... a green door; a bloody hand banging

insistently upon it, and then the same door with blood smeared over its paint and leading down to... her? Was that her sitting on the ground, and leaning against the door in a puddle of blood?

Chris gasped and sat up in bed. It was dark, and her first thought was that she had been dreaming, but that was before she realized she wasn't at home.

**Stephen is here.**

She stiffened, but then made herself relax. Now that she was more awake, Stephen's scent was obvious.

"I guess I have you to thank for the bed and the pajamas."

A small movement to her right made her look that way. The shadows seemed to swirl about him, and his eyes had an inner light. Although Stephen's eyes seemed human and did not have slit pupils, the glow reminded her strongly of Flint. He was sitting in a chair with an open book balanced on his knee. His eyes seemed to grow brighter, and the shadows less deep, until his entire face was revealed. He studied her like a specimen under a microscope.

She frowned uneasily. "Why the mind tricks?"

Stephen chuckled. "Nothing fazes you, does it?" His eyes looked entirely normal and the shadows had fled.

"I wouldn't say that. Being stabbed stings a bit."

He smiled. "Flippancy, yes that would be your refuge. You are correct. You do have me to thank for the pajamas. Do you like them?"

"You wear pajamas?"

"Yes, and sleep in a bed, though not that one in case you were wondering."

She had been, and felt her face heat at his knowing look.

"Coffins make for a good story, but they cannot compete with a feather bed for comfort. How are you feeling now?"

She felt pretty good for someone who had been stabbed a dozen times. When she checked under her pajama top—she

really hoped it had been Marie who had cleaned her up and dressed her—she found no trace of her wounds; not even a scar.

“How long have I been here?”

“About five hours give or take. Your kind heals almost as fast as mine, but silver does slow the process. We found you unconscious behind the club, and I ordered some of my people to follow your trail. They cleaned up the mess you left in the alley, and recovered your property. Your things are hanging in the wardrobe. You may keep the pajamas. I have more.”

“Thanks. My computer?”

“I assure you it’s undamaged.” He pointed to the table in the corner. Her files were piled neatly next to the computer. Stephen followed her gaze and nodded. “Charles persuaded them to give it all back.”

“Them?”

“When he reached the alley where you were attacked, he found some young men squabbling over your things. He took care of the matter.”

She didn’t want to know what Stephen meant. All that mattered was that she was safe, and all her stuff had made it with her.

“I was on my way here to ask for your help.”

Stephen closed his book and put it aside. “I suspected as much. Edward told me of the statement you gave the reporters outside your home.”

“I thought it was time I made a start on what we agreed.”

He nodded. “I’m glad you did. Marie was very pleased. She said you made a good impression, and gained us at least a point across the board in the polls.”

“You track the polls that closely?”

“This is a very serious matter for me, Chris. Very serious. I know you’re aware of how the law regards my kind. Anyone can attempt to kill me, and yet be assured that no charges will be brought against them. After all, you cannot kill a dead man, can you? No matter what it takes, I will protect myself

from AML and others, but gaining the protection of the law is still a worthy goal. You cannot know how irritating it is that I cannot vote, or own property in my own name, or instigate a lawsuit, or protect myself from one... there are hundreds of things I cannot avail myself of, that even the least deserving of the Republic's citizens takes for granted."

"I think I'm beginning to understand," she said, remembering her forced retirement and her lack of employment.

"Yes, perhaps you are at that, but at least you still have some rights. As matters stand, I have none."

According to the law, vampires were dead. The government, and those supposedly in the know, regarded them as corpses animated by magic. Corpses couldn't own property of any kind, and they certainly didn't have rights. That was the official line, and until recently only vampires had cared to contest it. Having met a few vamps over the years, she tended to think they had a point.

"I know, Stephen. I said I will help you, and I will, but I have something I have to do first. I came here because I need a place to stay where the Alley Dogs can't get at me. I realize it's an imposition..."

Stephen snorted. "Do you know why this place is built underground?"

"The sun?"

"No. It's a fortress, built to keep me and mine safe from people like Pederson and his Alley dogs. I am always in danger, Chris, and not just from those you call monsters. Your coming here does not increase my peril one iota."

She supposed that was true. "Well, thanks. I need your help with something else, if you're willing."

"What can I do?"

"I think Ed Davis can lead me to Ryder. I'm going to call him, and offer him a deal. I want you to honor it."

Stephen pursed his lips. "What deal?"

"I don't know yet what he will ask for."

"Then you're not thinking clearly."

"How's that?"

"Davis is a reporter. What else would he want but your story?"

She frowned. Ed Davis was slime, but he was also one thing more: a damn fine reporter. Stephen was right. He would want exclusive rights to her story, but she doubted even that would be enough for him. He would never give up a source like Ryder for a single story.

"You're right, but to give up Ryder he'll want more. What do you think of making Davis our pet reporter?"

Stephen looked intrigued by the idea. "Davis *is* the darling of the networks just now. I should think Marie would be delighted if you could find a way to recruit him for us." He stood, and picked up his book. "I'll back whatever you decide along those lines... within reason. I trust you not to beggar me."

He crossed the room to the door.

"Stephen?"

He turned to look back. "Yes?"

"Thank you."

Stephen inclined his head in a brief bow. "A pleasure," he said and left.

As soon as the door closed, she jumped out of bed and stripped. She found her last pair of jeans in the wardrobe and pulled them on. A bright red sweater and a pair of socks were next. Her blood-spattered sneakers were last of all. She shrugged into her shoulder harness, and checked her gun before holstering it. Two loaded magazines went into the pockets of her jeans together with fistfuls of loose ammunition. Remembering the last time she had met Ryder, she wanted plenty with her. She grabbed another handful of shells, and jammed them into her other pocket. Her link was sitting on top of her files. It still had Ed's number in its memory. She hoped he was at home.

**This should be interesting.**

“Oh do shut up,” she said crossly as she selected Ed’s number. “Pick up you son of a—”

“I said no calls!” Ed snarled over the line. “I have someone here!”

“Eddy, daaaarling. Have I got a story for you!”

“Chris?”

“That’s right. Are you interested?”

“In a story?” he asked warily. “What story?”

“Not over the link, Eddy. You know better than that. I want a face to face for this one. Just you and me. No one else. Deal?”

“No deal. I don’t come running when you whistle.”

She counted to five under her breath.

“All right, when and where?”

She grinned. “Lost Souls. It’s a nice place just off 104<sup>th</sup> street.”

“I know where it is. Why there?”

“A very good friend of mine owns it.”

Ed hissed in surprise. “Edmonton the vampire? He’s a friend of yours?”

She smiled, reeling Ed in was going to be easier than she had thought. “Would you like to meet him?”

“No point,” Ed said, sounding as if meeting Stephen was not important, but Chris wasn’t fooled. “He won’t talk to me, I’ve tried before. He keeps himself to himself and won’t let any of us talk with his vamps.”

By us, he probably meant the newsies. Good on Stephen for denying those vultures access to his people. Good on him. Chris had more in common with Stephen than she had first suspected; they both loathed publicity and the media. She smiled crookedly. Friendships should always be based on strong foundations, and hating newsies seemed like a good one to her.

“He would welcome you if I asked him.”

“What are you up to?” Ed asked, suddenly becoming suspicious. “I know there’s something. You hate the sight of

me, and now here you are inviting me to come see you. You're up to something."

She cursed under her breath. She had over-played her hand. She crossed her fingers and tried another tack. "I told you why I want you here. If you don't want the story, I have someone at WKNC in mind that will jump at the chance to screw you over. You remember her, don't you?"

"You wouldn't do that to me, Chris," Ed said in a choked voice. He didn't sound like he believed what he was saying. "As I recall, you didn't like her either."

Ed used to work for WKNC, but Kelly Armstrong, a younger and some said more competent reporter, took his place. It probably didn't help that his replacement was a woman. No matter how much he tried to act charming, those who really knew him knew him as a chauvinist. He was right that she didn't like Kelly Armstrong, but then, she didn't like anyone that got in her way when she was trying to catch a killer. Kelly, and Ed for that matter, had done that in the past.

"Things change. Do you want the story or not?"

"Give me an hour," Ed said.

"I'll give you thirty minutes, then I'm calling Kelly."

She broke the connection before he could reply.

**That was fun.**

Chris laughed. It was.

\* \* \*

## **An Old Flame**

When Chris stepped out of her bedroom, she found herself in a fully furnished living space equipped with all the modern conveniences. Her suite was just one of dozens of apartments and rooms built on three levels below Lost Souls. When Stephen had described the place as a fortress, she hadn't dreamed he'd meant it was as big as one!

Stephen had lived for years on the lowest level, with the floors above him occupied by the club's employees—shifters and vamps—all housed in comfort below ground to protect him. She did ask where he was living now, but he smiled and kept silence. She suspected he lived with Marie, who—she had learned—was Marie Sterling, the daughter of the late billion-dollar industrialist William P. Sterling. William Sterling's death, and the story of Marie's captivity and later death at the hands of a vampire, had made national headlines about eight years ago. Chris had still been in uniform back then, and hadn't connected Stephen's Marie with Marie Sterling the murdered heiress. Perhaps that was another reason for the pair's almost compulsive interest in the amendments. As Stephen had said earlier, the current state of the law did not allow vampires to own property. That meant Marie, being a vampire and legally

dead, could not claim her inheritance.

"So, what did you do?" Chris asked, reaching for another sandwich.

She was always ready to eat these days. Luckily, Stephen knew that and had some of his people stock the refrigerator for her. She had already wolfed down a pile of chicken wings, and was just now starting a second plate of sandwiches between sips of strong coffee. Her rapid healing had taken a lot out of her, and she needed to build her strength back up.

Stephen and Marie were sitting together on the couch. Each held a glass of fresh blood from which they drank occasionally. Bloodsmell was strong in the room, and Smoke was hyperaware of it, but Chris was determined not to embarrass either them, or herself, by mentioning it.

Marie smiled at Stephen. "I had a friend to help me." She took his free hand in hers, raised it to her lips, and kissed it. "I was very fortunate."

Chris smiled, but it faded as she realized how much she envied their closeness. Would she ever experience that intimacy again? Thoughts of Mark were bittersweet. She couldn't conceive of finding anyone like him again.

"I've had a lot of experience with this sort of thing," Stephen said. "The trick is to find reliable and trustworthy people willing to front for you."

Marie nodded. "You've met David, haven't you, Chris?"

"David Lephmann?"

Marie nodded.

"He came to visit me at the hospital. Is that who you used?"

"He's a friend. I knew him and Stephen only slightly before my... before my death. Stephen helped me arrange things so that David could take control of my shares, especially my shares in Techtron. My father left me everything he owned, but I couldn't legally claim any of it. Stephen fixed it so that David inherited everything. In return, David saw to it that I didn't lose my father's home and that I have money when I

need it. If I want something, he gets it for me.”

“It is not a perfect solution,” Stephen added, “but I have become resigned to living my life through others. For instance, *Lost Souls* is mine, but Edward’s name appears on all deeds and contracts. It is the way of things for us.”

“For now,” Marie said.

Stephen nodded. “For now. Perhaps the amendments will change things. We will see.”

Chris wondered what would happen to Techtron and NSPCL if the amendments went through. Would everything revert to Marie, or would Lephmann retain control? Lephmann was a canny businessman. She was sure he had set up contingency plans.

She finished eating, and was about to make herself a second coffee when Ed arrived. He and another man were escorted into the room by a pair of vampires—two of Stephen’s bodyguards. Both vamps wore dark business suits, and dark glasses to hide their eyes. They looked very intimidating, and were meant to. They wore their jackets unbuttoned, and she caught a brief glimpse of their weapon’s harness as they moved. They didn’t need guns to protect Stephen, but she supposed even vampire bodyguards needed their props.

She stood to greet Ed, and show him to a seat. Stephen dismissed the guards. Ed nervously watched them leave, obviously relieved when the door closed behind them. That made her grin. Didn’t he realize he was in a room with two vampires and a shifter? His friend carrying the camera equipment certainly did.

She smiled and offered her hand to Ed’s friend. “Hi, I’m Chris.”

“Yeah I know,” the cameraman warily reached to shake her hand, and Chris snatched the camera away. “Hey!”

She turned away to check the camera was off. It wasn’t. She considered smashing it, but decided not to, and hit the power switch. The steady red glow of status indicators faded.

Ignoring the cameraman’s squawking, she turned to Ed. “I

told you to come alone.”

Ed shrugged, and smiled disdainfully. “Are you going to introduce me to your friends?”

With his hands on his hips, the cameraman glared at Chris. “Tell her to give me my stuff back, man. Do you know how much that shit costs?”

Chris let a little of her anger leak into her eyes. “*Sit down*, and keep shut!”

He paled and stumbled back from her.

“Calm down, Chris. Your beast is showing,” Stephen said, smoothly retaking his seat next to Marie. “Mr. Davis and his friend are both welcome. The camera, however, is not.” He nodded at the cameraman. “Take a seat, please. Your equipment will be returned when our business is concluded.”

The cameraman chose a seat as far from them all as possible.

Chris took a deep breath, and forced her eyes to fade back to normal. Anger was something she needed to learn to control, and she had a long way to go. She took her seat, and put the camera on the floor next to her feet.

“I told you to come alone,” she said again.

“I go nowhere without a camera, Chris. You should have remembered that about me.”

“What happened to Laurell?”

Ed shrugged. “She bugged out a couple of years ago. Last I heard she was in New York.”

Laurell had been his assistant when Chris and Ed were dating. It had been her job to make him look good on camera, and they had been almost inseparable.

She wondered what Ed had done to make her leave him. “Let’s start again. Ed Davis, meet Stephen Edmonton and Marie Sterling. Stephen owns Lost Souls and is helping me out.”

Ed didn’t appear afraid, which was a neat trick considering Stephen’s reputation. He leaned forward and shook hands with both of the vampires, and then settled back in his seat.

"I know you both by reputation, of course. I would like a chance to interview you sometime."

Stephen smiled briefly. "That might be arranged... if this meeting is successful."

Ed obviously got the message. "What do you need?"

"I'll let Chris explain."

Ed turned to her. "So explain."

"Before I do that, Eddy boy, I want to make it clear there will be no negotiation here. You give me what I want, and in exchange you get media access to the three of us, and exclusive rights to my story. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Don't call me Eddy. I don't like it."

"I don't care what you like, *Eddy*. You're here because I need information. You will tell me what I want to know, and in return, I'll give you the story of the year."

Ed snorted. "You're taking a lot for granted. I'll admit that I'm interested in your story. There isn't a reporter in the city that wouldn't jump at the chance to nail you down, Chris, but the story of the year? I don't think so. Now, if you were talking about the amendments..." he broke off, and looked sharply at Stephen.

Stephen smiled and nodded. "Indeed. A big story, is it not?"

Ed swallowed as he realized how big a story he was being offered. "What do you need?"

"Ryder," Chris said. "Give him to me."

Ed paled. "I don't know who you're talking about."

"Doug Ryder, the man responsible for the shifter slayings, the man that attacked me, and screwed up my life. I know you're in contact with him, Eddy. Tell me where he is, and you get the story."

"You think I know where this person is? I don't know anyone named Ryder."

**He knows... he knows where Ryder is! If his heart pounded any harder, it would jump out of his chest! He's lying his tail off!**

Chris clenched her fist so hard her bones creaked. "Don't mess me around, Eddy. I'm a shifter. I can tell when you're lying. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff I can do now."

Ed stood, preparing to leave. "I don't know what you're talking about. You've wasted my time."

Chris was up and across the room in a fraction of a second. She slammed Ed back into his chair, and held him there easily with a hand on his chest. He struggled, but she was much stronger than she looked.

"Listen to me," she spat. "Ryder killed five men, and he nearly killed me. You *will* tell me what you know, or so help me I'll rip your heart out and *eat it!*"

Stephen winced. "No need to be so dramatic, Chris. Just break his fingers one at a time, and then work up his arms. He'll talk eventually, and besides, I would prefer you didn't get blood on the carpet."

She smiled at Ed's sweating face. "You see how it is... you do, don't you?"

"I can't," Ed whispered fearfully. "If I give up a source, I'll never work in this city again!"

"No one will know."

"It will come out, Chris, this stuff always does! It would finish me!"

"Chris," Stephen said. "Let him up."

She glanced at Stephen, and backed off.

Stephen tapped Eddy on the knee with one finger to gain his attention. "Mr. Davis, is your career your only concern?"

Ed sneered. "Don't try to appeal to my better nature. I don't have one."

Stephen smiled. "I already knew that. You have misunderstood me. I was going to say that if your career is your only concern, I can easily safeguard it for you."

"How?" Ed asked suspiciously.

"Only those in this room will be privy to what you tell us. You will obviously tell no one, and we have no reason to tell. That only leaves your assistant. I can fix that problem for

you.”

Ed’s cameraman jumped to his feet. He backed hurriedly toward the door. “Now wait a damn minute!”

Marie was suddenly behind him, and holding his arms. Chris blinked in shock. Marie had moved too fast to follow. One second she was sitting at her ease on the couch, the next she was across the room holding the cameraman in a grip of iron. Her eyes shone silver, reflecting the light as if a pair of chrome orbs had somehow replaced them. Chris shivered, wishing Marie would put on her sunglasses.

“Stay calm. You will not be harmed,” Marie whispered soothingly, ignoring the cameraman’s struggles.

Ed was breathing fast, and his eyes were wide with panic. “What are you going to do?”

Stephen chuckled. “Not kill him... unless you would prefer us to do that?”

“No!”

“As I thought. I can guarantee that he will not tell anyone what occurs during this meeting. Let me demonstrate.” He turned to look behind him. “Marie?”

Marie swung the cameraman around, and stared into his eyes. A second or two later, his shoulders slumped. He stared at Marie in a trance and she released his arms.

“What is his name?” she said to Ed.

“Sam.”

Marie cocked her head and studied Sam. “How are you feeling, Sam?”

Sam smiled dreamily. “Fine... I feel good.”

“That’s good, Sam. I want you to remember that you feel good. You are not afraid. You are relaxed.”

“All right,” Sam mumbled.

Marie smiled, and continued in a slow dreamy voice. “Whatever I tell you to do, you will do. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Marie nodded in satisfaction. “That’s good, Sam. Very good. When I tell you to do something and you do it, you will

feel happy and relaxed. Just the way you feel now. The thought of disobeying me fills you with fear. Thinking of disobeying me makes you feel very bad. It is wrong to disobey me. You don't want to, and even thinking about it makes you feel guilty. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

Marie smiled and continued in a slow and serene voice. "Yes, that is right. Relax, and remember how good it feels to obey. I want you to forget everything you heard since walking into the club. You will remember accompanying Ed, but he left you watching the show. You enjoyed yourself, while he had his meeting. Afterwards, you asked him how it went, but he wouldn't tell you very much. All he said was that the meeting went fine. You know nothing else about it. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Sit in your seat and wait for me."

Sam turned, still staring into space, and went back to his seat.

Chris realized she was gaping and closed her mouth. She shook herself and turned back to business. "There, all done. Now tell me what I want to know before I ask Marie to steal it out of your head. If you make me do that, I'll see to it that you get nothing."

Ed licked his lips. He was sweating and very pale. Marie's little show with Sam had obviously impressed and frightened him, but he was made of sterner stuff than Chris realized. He still had balls enough to try to negotiate.

"I get your story?"

"I said you would. Do you need it in writing?"

"In writing would be good..." he said, and Chris scowled angrily. "Okay! I was only kidding."

"You weren't kidding, Eddy. I know you."

Ed smiled crookedly. "I know you do. Your story, tempting as it is, isn't enough for me. I want in."

"In?" she asked in confusion. "In where?"

"Don't take me for a fool. I saw your little impromptu news conference outside your place. Nice touch making it seem off the cuff like that. You and he," Ed nodded at Stephen. "Are working with the Amendment Lobby."

Stephen smiled. "Actually, you're quite wrong about that."

Chris nodded. "He *is* the Amendment Lobby... or its leader at least. You're slipping, Eddy. Even I figured that out on my own."

Ed looked at them both in confusion. "But I thought Lephmann..."

"Our current spokesman." Stephen said. "David is an ally, and a good friend of mine. He agreed to front for the lobby. Not a hardship, as he believes passionately in our goal."

"Unbelievable," Ed whispered. "No one suspects. I would know! No one suspects you're pulling Lephmann's strings."

Stephen smiled wryly at Marie. "Anger or amusement?"

Marie grinned. "Amused, definitely amused."

"What?" Ed asked, frowning in confusion.

Stephen shrugged. "I was just wondering what David's reaction would be. I can assure you that no one controls David. He doesn't have strings to pull, and if he did, I wouldn't be the one to risk pulling them."

Ed shrugged, obviously not very interested in Stephen's explanation. "Do we have a deal?"

Chris glanced at Stephen, and he nodded gently. "All right, Eddy, you're in."

"Great," Ed said in satisfaction. "It will almost be like old times."

She sighed. If he truly understood, he would never have gotten involved in this. He had been in contact with Ryder, maybe knew where he was, certainly knew he was responsible for five murders, and yet he had said nothing to the police. By keeping Ryder's location secret, he was an accomplice to murder. By rights, she should hand him over to Ken, but she needed him. She was going to let him get away with it, because

it suited her purposes. That didn't make her feel good; not at all. She shook her head wishing things were different.

"Are you all right with this deal?" Stephen asked.

"Not really," she said.

"Hey! You can't back out now," Ed said angrily. "I get your story, I get interviews with Stephen and his vamps, *and* I cover all the Amendment Lobby's functions. *That's* the deal."

She snarled. "The deal is what I say it is! I haven't heard squat worth listening to from you yet."

Ed stuck his chin out belligerently. "Sit down and listen for a minute and maybe you will."

Chris took her seat and waited for answers.

"Good." Ed said, and collected his thoughts. "The first thing you have to realize is that I've known Doug Ryder for years." He nodded at her surprise. "Didn't know that, did you? You thought I was just using him for a story. Just goes to show you aren't as clever as you like to think."

"Get on with it."

"I knew him before he ran off to join the army. We were in high school together, so when he turns up asking for a favor after all these years, I was surprised, but I said okay for old time's sake."

Chris frowned. "What was the favor?"

"He said he was doing research for a book he wanted to write and needed a cover story in case people checked up on him. To tell you the truth, I wasn't interested enough to ask a lot of questions. He's the kind of guy that starts writing and ten years later only has a couple of chapters to show for it.

"Anyway, I fixed him up with a position at Channel 5, and gave him a few props to make him look the part of a freelancer. You know the sort of thing. Press pass, guild membership card, one of my old headsets... that kind of thing. I swear to you, Chris, that I had no idea that he was the killer."

"You expect me to believe that?"

Ed shrugged. "I don't care if you do or not, but remember this: it wasn't until after the fifth murder that you released

Ryder's name and description. You got that from the Hodges girl, didn't you?"

She nodded reluctantly. Sandy Hodges gave her Ryder's description, and *confirmation* of his name. Vincent's message disk had given them the name much earlier. Releasing Ryder's name alone would have achieved nothing. At least, that's what she had decided back then. Now? There was no telling, but she doubted Ed would have come forward.

"So you set Ryder up as a journalist, and sent him on his merry way. Where is he?"

Ed raised his hands. "I'm coming to that. The first couple of times he dropped by my place and left me a few things. Good stuff, all of it. I offered him money, but he laughed at me. Said he had no need of money. Anyway, after the first couple of times he started getting paranoid. Acted real cagey, and wanted to meet me in public places. His stuff was good so I humored him. The problem is, he got worse fast. He starting calling me on my link, and telling me where to pick up stuff."

"A dead drop?"

"That's it. He put a disk in a case and dropped it in the garbage behind a burger joint. It was disgusting. I had to root through a ton of stinky stuff to find the damn thing. I wasn't going to do that again."

Chris smiled. She knew where this was going, and it was perfect. "Who did you use to watch the bin?"

Ed nodded at the comatose Sam. "Who else?"

"When did you decide to start having Ryder followed?"

Stephen and Marie looked at each other in surprise. Stephen raised his point first. "That would have been very dangerous."

Marie nodded. "He could have been killed. A shifter should have been able to track him by scent alone. A strong one like Ryder should have sensed him."

"Not so dangerous," Ed disagreed smugly. "Sam is the best cameraman I've ever had. Some of his stuff is amazing. He's a

nut about the latest tech.”

“You used remotes.” Chris frowned as she realized something important. “This was after you figured out Ryder was the perp.”

Ed shifted uneasily in his seat. “Just before you were attacked.”

“But you guessed it was him *before* that.”

Ed nodded reluctantly, but then he brightened. “But I didn’t know where he was; it wasn’t my fault, you see?”

“It never is,” she said bitterly.

“I couldn’t give him to you, Chris. I didn’t know where he was!” Ed insisted again, more vehemently.

“Yeah, yeah. Relax. I only have one man in mind to blame, and that’s Ryder. You’re in the clear.”

Ed sighed in relief. “Sam’s little gadgets followed him back to where he was staying. What a dump! I couldn’t believe it at first.”

She tried to quell her excitement, but her voice betrayed her anticipation. “Where is he staying?”

\* \* \*

## **Taking the Offensive**

Chris parked the shiny black four-by-four she had borrowed from Stephen, and peered into the darkness. Rain fell in a torrential downpour that looked set to last through the night. Griffith Park appeared in a flash of lightning, and then submerged itself in darkness once again. The observatory building seemed deserted; it had been “temporarily” closed for renovation years ago, but as with other things in Los Angeles, the money had dried up before the work could be completed.

The main building, still sheathed in scaffolding, would probably remain derelict until someone decided to pull the entire useless edifice down. The observatory grounds, where pristine lawns once grew, were now a barren and abandoned construction site. What surprised her about Ryder’s choice of hiding place was that unlike the observatory, the zoo, museums, Greek theatre, and other attractions, were still popular with tourists. It was not the sort of place she would have chosen for a hideout.

Chris opened the car door and stepped out into the storm. The rain plastered her hair to her skull in seconds, but she didn’t run for cover. Instead, she pulled up the collar of her borrowed coat and turned in place. Although she saw

everything in shades of black and grey, her eyes—a wolf's eyes—pierced the darkness easily.

Lightning flashed again, and thunder rumbled seconds later. The rain drummed upon the ground hard enough for raindrops to bounce back into the air. She had parked well away from the fence that surrounded the site, and it was a moonless night. She had no fear that Ryder would either see or hear her coming, and in the rain, his nose would be useless. It was falling so heavily, she felt like she was trying to breathe under water.

She ran quickly across the open space, keeping low, and swarmed up the chain link fence. Once over the top, she let herself drop to land in a crouch in the mud. She searched the darkness, but the building remained quiet, protected by the skeletal piping of the scaffolding and the rotting tarpaulins draped over it like shrouds. Her eyes pierced the dark keenly, but she still felt blinkered without the scents her nose could normally detect. Everything smelled the same; the storm had washed all trace of Ryder away, and replaced it with the clean scent of autumn rain. She had lived all her life without the benefit of a shifter's sensitive nose, but already she had come to rely on the edge it gave her. She felt vulnerable without it.

Keeping low, she ran for the nearest scaffold. She had no intention of going up the steps and through the front door.

**Your little gun won't work against him.**

She gritted her teeth and struggled up the scaffolding. Under her breath she said, "I remember."

She climbed mainly using her arms. There were no footholds for the first fifteen feet or so, and the cross supports were too far apart this close to the ground. She went up the scaffold, quickly pulling herself up, leaving her legs kicking free below her. The pipe was slippery, and it took longer to climb than it would have on a dry night. It was a shame the ladders had all been stolen.

**Do you want to die?**

"Don't you know?" She hooked a leg over the first walkway,

and dragged herself up. “I thought you knew everything about me.”

She ran along the boards to one of the tall narrow windows. She peered into the building, but it was as dark inside as out. Lightning flashed, and she caught a glimpse of the once-splendid interior. There were puddles and ruination, but no sign of Ryder. Lightning flashed again and again. The storm raged at its height, and the wind was coming up. She clutched one of the pipes to steady herself, before moving on. She needed to get onto the roof.

**Sometimes you want to die, but at other times, you do not.**

Chris found a hole in the walkway above her head, and pulled herself up. “Yeah well, that’s human beings for you. Confusing, isn’t it?”

**Yes,** Smoke said, sounding very serious. **Let me out.**

“Nuh-uh. We’ve had this conversation.”

All the walkways had an opening where the ladders used to be. Reaching the fourth level, she was pleased to find them still in place. She found her way up quite easily after that.

The footing on the roof was treacherous. Much of it had fallen in, leaving only the supports for her to walk on. With the rain pounding her and making everything slippery, she would have to be crazy to try crossing. She grinned at the thought and stepped onto the beam.

“I don’t plan to die tonight.”

**Few plan to die.**

She moved carefully along the beam, but wobbled and had to stop to regain her balance. To her left there used to be a glass section; a sort of skylight. She remembered it had been pyramid-shaped with a square base. There was nothing but a hole now. Far below, lit only by flashes of lightning, she could see the main foyer. Hanging from a steel cable attached to the roof beam, there was a badly corroded brass sphere. It looked like a huge pendulum in some great clock—a broken clock for it was still. Below the sphere was a pit full of broken glass and

rubble, probably the remains of the skylight.

**I do not want you to die.**

Chris wobbled again. "Of course not. You would die too."

**You fight against the bonding. You weaken us.**

She shook wet hair out of her eyes. Smoke was in her head for the Lady's sake. What could be closer than that? Thunder boomed in the heavens, and a gust of wind caught her. It blew her into that inviting abyss. Quicker than thought, she made a grab for the beam and caught it, but her left hand slipped on the wet metal leaving her dangling from only one hand. Lit by lightning like a faulty light bulb, death awaited her on twisted metal far below. Her heart was pounding, and she was shaking, but it wasn't from fear. It was excitement. Adrenaline rushed through her veins, adding even more strength to her muscles. She tried to reach the beam with her free hand, and laughed when she couldn't. It's true what people say about shifters being crazy. Her situation proved it. She swung back and forth on her single hand, until she could finally reach the beam with the other. Swinging her legs up, she finally clambered back on top.

She took only a moment to get her breath back then hurried across the beam and back onto the sagging roof. The planetarium dome loomed close. She ran toward it, but suddenly lost her footing and fell. Her foot had punched right through the weakened roof, but it held her weight, barely, and she pushed herself back up. She hissed in pain, and wrenched at her leg, trying to free it.

**We should be as one.**

"Not now, Furface," she growled. She pulled, ignoring the pain and the sound of her jeans ripping. Something warm trickled down her leg, and into her sneakers. Blood. "I'm a little busy here."

**There is no more time. You know the gun will not kill him. You know this! You cannot fight him this way, but together we have a chance. Only your fear stops you from**

**embracing me. Let it go!**

She shook with cold and the beginnings of fear. The rain fell so hard, she could barely see her hand as she pulled frantically on her leg. It wouldn't budge more than an inch. If Ryder found her like this, she was dead.

"Could you stop yakking, and help me?"

**You admit you need my help.**

She cursed under her breath. "Don't let it go to your head, Furface."

**Let me out.**

"Why?" she asked warily.

**You are stuck because your foot is the wrong shape. It will not bend down far enough.**

She swore again; she should have thought of the Change. Her other forms didn't have human feet; they wouldn't have become trapped like this. She didn't want to change, but she didn't want Ryder to find her like this either. She frowned. Maybe she could change just her legs without Smoke's help. It had worked for her eyes after all.

**Fool. Your fear makes you weak.**

"Worried?"

Chris didn't wait for an answer. She concentrated, trying to remember how her half-wolf form had looked and felt. Pain crackled up her leg as the bones in her foot dislocated and changed. She clapped a hand over her mouth to hold back a scream, and forced her foot to warp into something resembling a paw. Groaning in pain, she finally pulled her leg out of the hole, and rolled onto her back.

"Okay... that hurt," she mumbled with her eyes closed against the rain. "That really hurt."

She rolled onto her side, and then sat up to look at the damage. The leg of her jeans was hanging in strips all the way up to her knee, as if someone had hacked at it with a knife, and her shoe was missing. Being a shifter was turning out to be really hard on her wardrobe. Wisps of black hair covered her foot, and ran part way up her leg. The change had stopped at

her knee. Her foot wasn't a foot anymore; it was a very large, very weird-looking paw. Only it wasn't really a paw either. It looked nothing like a dog's foot. It was long—about a size eighteen if there was such a size—and narrow at the heel. The ankle was all wrong. Her foot attached to her leg at about a forty-five degree angle, and the ankle let it rotate down but not up. The rough pads proved the foot was designed to carry her weight on the toes. There were four; each was wide and wickedly clawed.

She stared at the monstrosity attached to her leg. There was no sign of the paint she had used on her toenails that morning. She had done a good job too. Hysterical laughter bubbled just below the surface, but she forced it and her absurd concern about nail varnish away.

**We should go. Ryder might have heard your whimpering.**

"I don't whimper."

Chris kicked off her remaining shoe and tried to stand. It was no good. Her right leg—the changed one—was longer than her left; much longer. She concentrated, and forced it to change back. She bit a knuckle, and didn't make a sound. After a few seconds of intense pain punctuated by the crunching sound of bone re-knitting, she had a pair of human legs and feet again.

"See?"

Smoke remained stubbornly silent.

Chris scampered bare foot over the roof, and reached her objective.

The planetarium's dome was in good shape; no rot, no holes, nothing. She circled it, looking for a way to see inside and found the roof access door. Chris peered through the porthole-like window set in the door and saw a light. It was the first sign of habitation she had found, but that wasn't all. There was a peculiar-looking contraption like a dumb-bell in the centre of the room. It was the old projector. The light shone from circular glass facets that dotted the machine at

either end. Of to one side, near the lowest row of plushly upholstered seats that circled the room, Ryder was leaning over someone strapped to a table.

Chris grabbed the door handle.

**Don't!**

"He's got Jason down there. I've got to get to him."

**He will hear you!**

She released the handle reluctantly, looking around in frustration for another way in. "I've got to get in there. He's doing something to that kid. Something bad, I know it."

**Then look for another way in.**

That was easier said than done. It could mean climbing back down the scaffolding, and Jason might not have that much time. Her plan had been to drop onto Ryder from above, but the storm had ruined it. Smoke was right. Ryder would know the instant she opened the door no matter how quiet she tried to be. What made her mad was that she hadn't realized it straight away. It had been a waste of time coming up here... she frowned, or had it?

She ran back to where she had fallen earlier, and crouched next to the hole her foot had made. She peered into the darkness, and thought she saw wooden flooring about fifteen feet below. It was a corridor or maybe an office. It would have to do; she didn't have time to find another way inside. Trying to keep the noise to a minimum, she carefully widened the hole, and slipped through. She let herself hang from her hands for a moment, and then let go. The storm and the sound of water gushing through the ruined roof covered the noise of her landing.

She peered around and decided she was in one of the exhibition halls. The room was much too large to be an office, and there were still one or two old display cases against the walls. Thick dust covered everything; it puffed up and hung in the air around her legs like mist as she moved. She pulled her gun and flicked off the safety before heading for the planetarium.

**Don't do this.**

"I haven't got time to talk," she whispered. "I'm working here."

**You will be dying here if you don't listen to me!**

"Can't do anything else," she grumbled.

**You hear, but you do not listen. Your. Gun. Will. Do. Nothing!**

"It will slow him down some."

**But what then? He will rip you—us apart.**

Chris stopped when she reached the planetarium doors. One was missing while the other hung crookedly from a single hinge. She lowered herself to her knees, and then crawled through the opening. Ryder was still working on Jason; the boy's screams testified to that.

"Lord and Lady, what's he doing to the kid?"

**Hurting him. Ryder wants revenge.**

She firmed her grip on the gun. "I've got to stop him."

**Then for your sake—and Jason's—Let. Me. Out!**

Jason's screams died away, replaced by sobbing. Ryder said something, but Chris couldn't hear what it was. Jason shrieked again, and Chris shook her head. She had been fooling herself thinking she could take Ryder down like this. Smoke was right; she needed a bloody tank, not a handgun. She silently shrugged out of her coat, and put her gun on top of it. Her hands shook, but not from the cold. She didn't want to do this, but if she could take out Ryder the way she had Janine, it would be worth it. She took a deep breath and...

**Not here! If you make a noise, he will be up here so fast that I won't have a chance!**

Chris scowled and slid backwards on her belly. Once outside, she ran back to the hall containing the display cases, and stripped off her clothes. She piled them in the corner out of the way. Tremors ran through her body, and her knees felt like jelly. She tried to pretend it was all due to the cold, but knew she was fooling herself. Lord and Lady, she didn't want to do this. She really didn't.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "All right. You want me to trust you, Smoke? Show me I can."

The pain wasn't as shocking as the other times she had changed. She was expecting it for one thing, and for another, it was a known quantity. She knew she could stand it because she had done so before. She dropped to her knees to prevent herself from falling, and then lay on her side. She panted as things inside began shifting and burning, but she didn't make another sound. Muscles stretched and tore, only to reform in new patterns moments later. Fur spread quickly, protecting her from the cold. Her ears lengthened and her face erupted into a muzzle filled with sharp teeth. Her legs, her arms, everything was warping into something else.

Chris let it happen. She didn't fight it; she didn't make a sound.

Smoke panted away the heat of the change, but did not stand up. Ryder was alpha like Jonas and Lephmann. He was too strong for her, but maybe not too strong for her half-wolf form. She concentrated on changing again. It took less than a minute before she was ready.

Back at the broken doors, she listened to Ryder torturing Jason for information. Her ears were very keen; almost as good as they were in full-wolf form. Ryder wanted to know where Jason's friends were. The boy was in no shape to answer, but Ryder continued his questions and his torture regardless. She could see that Jason wasn't tied to the table; he had been nailed to it with daggers driven through his wrists and ankles. The boy hadn't tried to change, or if he had, it hadn't worked and she knew why. The daggers were silver. So were the knives that Ryder was using to flay the boy. Silver not only slowed healing, it impeded the Change. No one could change with that much silver in him.

Smoke hesitated. She remembered Chris being stabbed with silver. She didn't want Ryder coming after her with one of those daggers. She picked up Chris' gun. It was a puny thing, and didn't fit her hand properly, but she was sure she

could still fire it if she had to. Whether she could hit anything was another matter.

She wasn't concerned with stealth as she entered the planetarium. There was only the one way in or out, but she didn't make a production of her entrance either. Ryder was so intent on what he was doing that she made it half way down the auditorium's steps before he sensed her. He turned and raised the dagger for a throw, but she was quicker.

She emptied the gun at him.

At least four of her shots hit Ryder. He staggered away from the table, but he didn't fall. Neither did he have time to make the Change. Smoke dropped the gun on the stairs and sprinted toward him. Before he could recover, she bowled him off his feet snapping and snarling at his face. He yelled and made a grab for her throat, but she was expecting the move. She clamped her jaws on his forearm and bit down. Hard. Blood spurted and bone grated on her teeth. Her eyes blazed at the pain she saw in his.

Ryder brought his knees up sharply. Taken by surprise, Smoke sailed over his head, tumbling head over tail. She sprang back to her feet, spat the piece of flesh she had ripped from his arm onto the floor, and charged him again. The claws of her right hand raked his face, and she plunged those on her left into his belly. Ryder folded, but then he came back up with his fists leading the way. He punched her full in the face, and she staggered back a few paces. She shook her head to clear it and rushed him, but he was ready and a kick to the head sent her to her knees. Another kick threw her on her back.

Ryder chuckled and came to stand over her. "You're no match for me in any form, Lieutenant, or should I call you Chris now?" He ripped open his blood-soaked shirt to reveal his wounds had already healed. "You see?"

Smoke exploded into a claw raking, snarling and biting fiend. This time she went straight for his throat. Ryder backed up, and turned his face away from her jaws. He raised an arm to fend her off, and her jaws snapped closed. She howled

in pain, and threw herself away from him. He had used his dagger at the last moment, and her jaws had closed upon it. She shook her head, spitting blood and the taste of silver from her mouth.

Ryder took the opportunity to run for the stairs.

She dared not give him time to make the Change. She raced up the stairs in time to see him disappearing down the corridor. She sprinted after him, snarling in fury and screaming her rage into the darkness. He was faster as well as stronger than she was. He was getting away! No, she wouldn't let him.

Ryder ran her a good chase—he knew his territory well—but finally he made a mistake and ran down a blind corridor. He turned back just as Smoke skidded around the corner and into the corridor where he stood at bay. Lightning flashed, illuminating him through the tall windows at his back, and just as suddenly plunged him back into darkness a moment later. She edged toward him with her arms outstretched, determined not to let him get away. She decided to go for his throat again as a diversion, and then rip his heart out.

Ryder grinned at her, as if he could hear her thoughts. “Stay out of my business, and I swear I won't kill you. Take my advice, and stay away.” He turned and leapt toward the window.

“Noooo!” she howled, leaping to catch him.

The glass shattered as Ryder went through, and a blast of wind and rain filled the corridor. Leaning out the shattered window, she stared into the darkness, but all she could see was broken glass in the mud three stories below. He was gone.

She went back to release Jason.

“Leave me,” Jason croaked, his voice ruined from all the screaming. “I'm dead already.”

She ignored him and pulled the daggers out of his wrists then out of his ankles. Jason screamed as each one came free. She tried to help him sit up, but he was too weak. Blood pumped from his wounds, and it wasn't stopping. He had

silver poisoning.

"Listen to me," Jason pleaded, "he's going after Marty. You have to get to him first. Leave me."

She used her claws to shred some of the seats, and used the upholstery to bind his wounds.

Jason grabbed her hand. "Listen!"

"I heard you," Smoke said, sounding like she'd been gargling with gravel. "Marty hiding. Ryder not find."

Jason shook his head wearily, and tears trickled slowly over his cheeks. "I couldn't help it. The bastard tortured me for days... the silver. I'm dying. I can feel it burning inside me like poison. Please, you have to tell Marty I couldn't help it."

She snarled and dragged Jason up by his neck. "What you do?"

"I told," Jason rasped. "Ryder knows where they are."

"Where?" Smoke shook him when he didn't answer. "*Where!*"

"*Sanctuary*," Jason gasped.

"Freeze!" roared a familiar voice.

Smoke looked back in time to see Ken leading a dozen heavily armed uniformed police officers into the room. She glanced at Jason hanging limp in her grasp, debating running for it.

"Drop him or I drop you," Ken said in a hard voice.

She carefully lowered Jason onto the table. She didn't doubt Ken meant what he'd said. It was a shame he hadn't been around to say it to Ryder earlier.

Ken kept his gun leveled, and the other officers followed his lead. "Can you understand me?"

"I understand," Smoke grated.

"Good. Step away from him—slowly. Back up all the way to those seats and stop. Do it now."

She did what he told her to do, knowing that trying to run would only make things worse. Chris would have to deal with Ken, not her. She stopped when told to stop, and watched as the police came down to cover her with their weapons. They

were carrying automatic rifles. One of them checked Jason for a pulse.

"He's alive."

Ken nodded. "Get an ambulance for him and a van for this... for the prisoner."

The officer nodded and spoke quietly into his radio. Smoke watched Ken approach. He barely glanced at Jason as he past by, so intent was he upon studying her. The expression on his face made her want to hide hers... or maybe rip his off; she wasn't sure. The others were getting nervous. They were afraid, she could feel it, and Ken was making it worse by approaching her. They wanted to shoot her, *needed to*. She remained statue-still as they took careful aim at her and spread out to avoid hitting Ken.

"We found your coat, Chris. Change back and I'll let you dress."

Smoke grunted in surprise. How had he recognized her? Not by the coat, Stephen had lent it to Chris along with the car. There was nothing in its pockets to link them. He must have followed her.

"Change back or I'll take you in as you are. I don't think you want that."

"Did you get Ryder?"

Ken's eyes narrowed. "Ryder was here?"

"We fight, he get away."

"All I saw was you killing that guy. Who is he?"

"Jason Kirkwood. I not kill."

"Lucky for you that's true."

"No. Ryder hurt him. I try stop."

Ken's people seemed to think that was funny. Some of them snorted, others shook their heads and laughed outright.

"You want me to shoot it, Lieutenant?"

"... animals stinking up the city..."

"Put 'em all down..."

"... that would save some police time..."

"What, and screw up my overtime, are you nuts?"

Ken waved them quiet. "You can tell your side down at Central. Change back, or go as is. Your choice."

Ken sounded different, harder, and his face was like granite. He held his gun unwaveringly in a white-knuckled grip. His scent was full of anger and pain, but beneath it, there was a deep sadness. When she didn't comply with his ultimatum immediately, he stepped back and raised a hand.

"On my order, put her down."

Most of Ken's team seemed eager to follow the order. She began the Change.

\* \* \*

## **Interview with a Shifter**

The clothes they gave her were itchy. They had bagged all of hers as evidence, and taken them down to the lab boys. It was a damn shame about her coat. Stephen had given it to her to replace her old one. It was brand new and real leather.

Her hands were cuffed to a steel loop in the shiny steel table, and she had an itch between her shoulder blades that was driving her nuts. That was all Chris could think about. She was locked in an interview room at Central accused of false imprisonment, torture, and Lady knew what else. She had been caught red handed—or clawed—at the scene of the crimes in question by her ex-partner, and all she could think about were ways to scratch the itch.

**Think about something else. Think about Ryder.**

“I’m not talking to you. You let him get away.”

The cuffs hurt. A standard bit of kit, rune cuffs were silver plated to prevent shifters changing. The runes warded against spells. She had used cuffs like them lots of times while interviewing shifters, some in this very room. A burn encircled her wrists where the skin came in contact with the hated metal, but mere pain could be borne. After all, the Change hurt way more than a burn that looked more like a rash. It was the itch

that was torture. She could probably snap the cuff's chain and reach the itch before anyone realized she had, but that would only make them mad. Best not.

**Before you let me out, you told me to prove I could be trusted.**

"I remember."

**I tried to do what you would have done. Should I have left Jason to die and followed Ryder?**

She stared at her reflection, wondering who was behind the mirror in the observation room. Ken might be, probably was, but would all the others come and view the freak? Baxter would, but not Jimmy. She doubted Cappy would be in at this time of night, but if he had been, he would have sat with her. He wasn't the kind to get his jollies second-hand through a bulletproof mirror.

**Well?**

"I'm thinking. Don't rush me."

Ken and Baxter joined her after about an hour of sitting alone contemplating her reflection. Ken entered first with a folder in one hand, and Baxter brought up the rear carrying a box of blank discs. She smiled at the sight. How many times had she seen things like this over the years? Thousands, but she had never seen it from this side of the table. Things were different now. She was the bad guy, and the role was an uncomfortable fit.

**I try to do what you want, but it's hard when you keep changing what that is.**

*I want Ryder dead, that most of all.*

**I know, but not at all cost... or am I wrong again? Should I have left the boy to die? I need to know what I did wrong.**

*Why, so you won't do it again?*

**Yes. I want you to be happy.**

She sighed. *You did the right thing.*

**Really?** Smoke said, sounding hopeful.

*I said so, didn't I?*

**Thank you.**

Chris watched Baxter struggling to open the carton of discs and grinned. Cellophane wrappers could be a bitch sometimes. "Good to see you, Dave. How's it going?"

Baxter grunted noncommittally. His eyes flicked nervously toward the mirror and skittered away. He busied himself with inserting a disc into the comp in the tabletop. Ken seated himself opposite Chris, and read through his notes. He wouldn't look her in the eyes.

**The one called Baxter is nervous.**

Chris nodded; she knew that from his scent and his actions. What she couldn't figure out was why. Baxter was an old hand at this sort of thing. He had almost as much experience as she did; more than Ken did in fact. What was there to be nervous about a routine interview?

"The sweats they gave me itch like crazy. You couldn't scratch my back for me, could you?" Ken frowned in annoyance but said nothing. "I'd do it myself, but..." she pulled sharply on the handcuffs, making the chain snap taut on the steel loop. "Pretty please? I'll be your slave forever."

Baxter grinned and shook his head. "Only you, Chris, only you." He came over and vigorously rubbed her back.

She groaned. "A little higher... *oh goddess* that's good." She shivered with pleasure. "I can't tell you how good that feels. It was driving me crazy."

Ken glared. "Are you done entertaining our audience, Detective?"

Baxter went back to his work.

She wondered who the audience was. Could be anybody, but Baxter's nervousness meant it was someone high up. Higher than Cappy, or he wouldn't care.

"Congratulations on the promotion, Ken," she said, trying to make him look at her. "I heard one of the guys call you Lieutenant. How the hell did that happen anyway?"

Baxter grinned. "That's what I'd like to know."

Ken gave Baxter a cold look that wiped the grin off his

face. "We're not here to talk about me. Are you ready to record?"

Baxter nodded and pressed a button.

Ken had changed, and not for the better. Where had her friend and partner gone? Baxter used to be the serious one, the one without a sense of humor, not Ken. It was as if they had switched bodies. This wasn't the Ken she knew. This was a... a *pod-person* or something!

Ken shuffled his papers into order. "Interview with Miss Chris Humber in regard to case number three-niner-zero slash three-six-one. Primary investigating officer: Lieutenant Kenneth Hart; also in attendance: Detective David Baxter. Acknowledge for the recording, please."

"Detective Baxter present."

"Chris Humber present, but I'm not happy about it."

Ken didn't smile. "And I'm Lieutenant Hart. Miss Humber, you have the right to an attorney, and the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed on preferred credit terms. Should you so wish, you may delegate a guild representative to advise you. Do you understand these rights?"

She leaned back in her seat as far as her cuffs would let her. "Such as they are."

"Yes or no please."

"Yes."

"It is my understanding that you earlier waved your right to an attorney. Is that correct?"

She shrugged. "Sure."

"Fine," Ken said, and settled back in his chair as if preparing for a long night. "Then we can get started. Where is Ryder?"

She shrugged again.

"You claimed earlier that you saw him."

"I did see him."

"Okay, why don't you tell me about that?"

Chris copied his posture. She knew the game even better

than he did, but she heartily wished she didn't have to play it. She was tired and hungry. Her change and the fight with Ryder had taken it out of her. Baxter had taken the other chair on Ken's side of the table, careful to leave a gap between them. He didn't want to obstruct the view of whoever was watching from the observation room.

She smiled at whoever was watching. "How's Flint these days? Did you ever get up enough nerve to ask her out?"

Baxter covered his amusement with a cough.

Ken began tapping his pen on the table. A sure sign he was irritated. "Agent Flint is not what we are here to discuss. She is no longer a part of my investigation."

*Want to bet?*

Smoke agreed. **Flint wants Ryder almost as badly as we do. She won't give up easily.**

Chris wouldn't have been surprised to find Flint on the other side of that mirror at that very moment. Ken wasn't lying when he said Flint was no longer part of his investigation, so she must be working solo, or with Barrows if he hadn't gone back to Quantico or wherever.

Ken tried another tack. "If you knew where Ryder was, why didn't you tell the police?"

"My source—"

"What source?" Baxter asked. "I'd like to talk to him."

"My *personal* source mentioned the possibility of Ryder being at the planetarium. It was only a possibility, so I thought I'd go look."

"You thought you would look," Ken said, sotto voiced. His pen drummed the table harder than ever.

"I didn't want to give you bogus info."

The drumming stopped, and Ken wrote something down. "Bogus."

She smiled, listening to the new rhythm Ken started. "I wanted to check it out first."

"Checking out things like this is my job. You're not a cop anymore."

Her smile vanished. "I noticed."

"Who is your source?"

"Do you remember a conversation we had when we first met Flint in Cappy's office?"

Ken frowned. "I'm not sure."

"Well, it doesn't matter. When we came out, I had to give Dave access to my files and I was worried about it. You said: 'You won't let them down, Chris, they know that.' You were right. I might have changed, but that hasn't. I'll never give up my sources, not even to you, Ken."

Ken stared into her eyes. "Do you know where Ryder is?"

"No, I don't."

"You're lying. You always blink when you lie."

"No I don't," she protested. "I don't know where he is. If I did, I would tell you."

Ken turned to Baxter. "She's lying."

Baxter nodded. "She's lying."

She gritted her teeth to stop herself from snapping at them. "I'm not. I want Ryder dead."

"That's the first true thing you've said." Ken sighed. "The thing is, Chris, I'm not in the business of killing people. I want him caught and put away. You might have forgotten what it is to be a cop, but I haven't."

She sprang to her feet, outraged. If she hadn't been cuffed to the table, she might well have gone over it with her hands around his neck. Anger pulsed through her head in time with her heartbeat, like a pressure headache. Throb-throb-throb. She suddenly felt hot, as waves of anger flooded her thoughts, but it had nothing to do with Smoke. This anger was all hers. She was panting, and her eyes had changed without her willing it. Everything in the room looked cold and harsh in shades of grey. Ken was leaning way back, almost enough to tip his chair over. There was no fear on Baxter's face, only pity. That was like a cold bucket of water thrown over her. What right did he have to pity her? She slumped back into her seat, still breathing heavily. How could Ken throw that of all things

in her face? He knew how devastated she had been by her forced retirement. What right did either of them have to treat her like a criminal?

She thumped the table, and closed her eyes to hide them. They were treating her like what she was, a shifter. Worse, a shifter found at a crime scene.

"I don't need your pity, Dave." She opened her eyes and frowned at the dent in the table beneath her fist. "What I need is a cup of coffee and a good night's rest. I don't need to sit here in handcuffs and be called a liar."

"Coffee I can do something about," Ken said and nodded to Baxter. "But the rest is up to you, Chris."

Baxter stood and left to get the coffee.

"Detective Baxter leaves the room. Interview suspended at," Ken checked the time. "Three fifteen a.m." He hit the stop button on Baxter's consol. "Where did you go after the press conference?"

She snorted. "That wasn't a press conference. I just wanted Ped... a certain person to know I wasn't at home."

Ken's eyes narrowed at the slip. "Who, and why?"

"Personal business. Nothing to do with Ryder." Ken didn't look convinced. Chris pointed at her eyelids. "Look, no blinking."

Ken didn't laugh. "Tell me where you went."

She couldn't see what harm it would do to tell him about Lost Souls, but that did not mean harm wouldn't be done. Ken might assume that Stephen was her source and try to question him. She couldn't imagine Stephen and Marie responding well to that.

"I want these cuffs off. They hurt."

"You know better than that. We worked well together for years, why won't you trust me now?"

She leaned forward abruptly, and Ken flinched. "That's why."

"It's you that's changed, Chris, not me."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. I've almost forgotten

what it was like to be human.”

**Well that's good.**

*Shut up you, I'm trying to explain something here.*

“It's not just external stuff like my eyes. I'm a shifter on the inside as well as on the outside. You know the way we used to explain a shifter's actions by saying he was crazy?”

Ken nodded.

“We were right. Shifters really do have a split personality.”

“I don't believe you're crazy. You're just being stubborn. You always did like going it alone.”

She shook her head. “I knew you wouldn't understand. When I went up on the observatory roof tonight, I learned something about myself. That place is a death trap. The rain was falling so heavily, I could barely breathe... well you know, you were there. I had to cross by balancing on the roof beams, but the wind came up and blew me off. I hung there swinging by one hand, looking at my death far below. Do you know what I did then?”

Ken shook his head.

“I laughed. I was scared shitless, Ken. I was going to die any moment, and I just laughed. Now don't say I'm suicidal. That's not what I am. I'm just a shifter, and we're different, that's all.”

Ken sat back and the silence stretched out.

She could tell he didn't understand what she was trying to say. She wanted him to understand, she really did. Despite her new abilities, he thought that, inside, she was still the woman he knew. She wasn't. Janine's death, and the fight in the alley, had proved it to her more than anything else could have. The old Chris would never have done what she had. She was a killer now, and that was okay. Really, it was okay, but she wished Ken hadn't seen her in the planetarium. In his mind, the image of her as some distorted monstrosity would eventually eat at him until it replaced his memories of the old Chris Humber. And that was sad. It would almost be like

dying again.

"Oh, to the hells with it," she said, feeling maudlin. She was getting soft. She had never been one to get all mushy. That hadn't changed; she wouldn't let all of the old Chris go. "I knew you wouldn't understand."

**I do not diminish you. If you would accept me fully, you would realize you are greater than your old self, not less.**

*I don't need your recruitment speech. I'm already in the club, remember?*

Smoke growled irritably. **Not fully. You fight me at every turn, and weaken us when we need to be strong.**

Baxter returned then with the coffees in paper cups, and Chris savored her first hot drink in hours. It lit a fiery trail down to her stomach, and she felt better for it.

Baxter sighed contentedly and put his cup down. "I needed that. Our guests went home. They want a report when we're done here. I told them you would pass it on through Cappy. Okay?"

Ken nodded silently, and pointed to the consol. Baxter pressed the record button. "Interview recommences at three twenty-five a.m. Those in attendance, as previously stated."

Chris finished her coffee and crumpled the cup into a ball. "Do you still want to know where I went after that press conference?"

Ken nodded again. "I want to know everything."

"I went to stay with some new friends."

Ken picked up his pen. "Names and addresses, please."

She shook her head slowly.

"Shifter friends?"

"Vampire friends." Ken looked disgusted. "I didn't let them bite me, for the Lady's sake! They're just people when you get to know them."

**Yes, just people that drink blood, can read minds, can make you do things you don't want to do. They never age, they live forever, and they can break the strongest of us in**

**half! Oh, and they stink.**

*Well yes, but they're still people.*

"Just people... will you listen to yourself? They're monsters! Worse, they're evil monsters!" He slammed his hand down on the folder. "Damn you for doing this to me. Damn you for going off on your own that night!"

Baxter switched off the recorder, and erased Ken's outburst from the disc. He reached for Ken's arm. "Are you all right?"

Ken knocked Baxter's hand away from his shoulder. "No, I'm not all right! I want every stinking shifter in the city dead, and every monster in the country put down!"

Chris gasped. "*I'm* one of those monsters."

Ken waved that away. "You're different."

"No, Ken, I'm not different. That's what I've been trying to tell you."

Ken wasn't listening. He stood abruptly and left the room.

She stared after him. Ken was teetering on the edge, and if he didn't get help, he was going over it. She wondered if the psych department knew what Ken was going through. Surely, someone must have noticed how tightly wound he was. She glanced at Baxter, but he was giving nothing away. She was sure Ken hadn't meant what he said. He would never actually try to kill shifters. He hated the AML fanatics, and had always called them terrorists. He would never become like them.

"He didn't mean it," she whispered, trying to sound convinced.

Baxter sipped his lukewarm coffee. "Yes he did."

"Who was behind the mirror, Dave?"

"Commander Watson and that know-it-all Barrows."

"What about Flint?"

"Nah, she's more of an action type of girl."

She grinned. He didn't know the half of it, and she wasn't going to tell him. The thought of Flint had a sobering effect on her. If Ken ever found out that Flint was a shifter... the way he was now, it would destroy him. He must never know.

"Any chance you can tell Flint I want to see her?"

Baxter looked uncertain. "If Ken finds out you're doing an end-run around him, he'll go nuts."

"What I have to say has nothing to do with Ryder, I swear. Just girl talk."

"Girl talk, huh? Okay, if I see her I'll let her know you want to chat."

"Great, thanks."

When Ken came back, his eyes were bloodshot, as if he had been crying. She didn't think he had though. She couldn't pick up the scent of tears. His was the scent of an angry and determined man. His face was very pale, but his expression was as hard as stone.

"I've just had word from the hospital," Ken said.

"How's Jason?" she asked, hoping for good news.

"He's in a coma. The doctors say they expect him to die before morning."

"Damn," she mumbled, remembering Jason's pleas to save Marty, and to tell his friend he was sorry.

*So am I kid, so am I.*

Ken took his seat, and Baxter started recording again. "It looks as if this case will be upgraded to a homicide by morning, and you were found at the scene. If you don't start telling me the truth about what happened, I'll have to arrest you."

She stared. "You can't really think I did all that stuff to the kid."

"Doesn't matter what I think happened. I *saw* you strangling him, and I wasn't the only one who did."

"I was trying to wake him up."

Ken shook his head. "I don't believe you. I'll tell you now, Chris, the way this thing is going, it's a cinch you'll go down for Jason's murder."

"He isn't dead yet."

"As good as. Now, are you going to start talking, or do I arrest you right now and send you down?"

She took a deep breath and nodded reluctantly. "I drove to

Griffith Park and....”

She gave him an edited version of the story. She kept Stephen, Marie, and Ed completely out of it, and said Jason fell unconscious before he could say anything. She missed nothing out about her adventures on the roof or about her fight with Ryder. There was no need.

“...and used the upholstery to bind his wounds. I tried to wake him. I wanted to ask him what Ryder wanted, but he was deeply unconscious. That’s just about when you came in, Ken. I was still trying to wake him when you told me to drop him.”

The silence was palpable. Ken was frowning as if he thought she was holding back, and she was of course, but when had her skills at bluffing lost so much of their potency? Maybe Ken was just too perceptive. She hadn’t had any trouble bluffing Ed after all.

**You weren’t bluffing with Ed.**

*Sure I was. I wouldn’t have let the vamps hurt him.*

**You can’t lie to me. You would have done whatever was necessary. As it should be.**

She didn’t have time to think about that. Ken was hunting the truth, and she had to be careful not to contradict her own story.

“When you entered the planetarium,” Ken said, doodling on the folder’s cover. “You heard Ryder questioning the boy.”

“Right.”

“What was he saying?”

She frowned. “I don’t know.”

Ken cocked his head. “Shifters have excellent hearing. Isn’t that correct?”

“I suppose they do.”

“Then why couldn’t you tell what he was saying?”

She shrugged. “I could see that Ryder was saying something, but Jason was screaming too loudly for me to hear what. Ryder was flaying him, Ken. Jason was screaming the place down.”

"I see. When I came in, I found you throttling Jason—"

"I was trying to wake him, not kill him!"

"So you say. I came in, and I heard him say the word *sanctuary*. What did he mean by that?"

She hadn't thought he had been close enough to hear that. She tried to look puzzled. "He was unconscious. He didn't say anything."

"I heard it distinctly."

"You couldn't have. I was right next to him, and I never heard it."

Ken sighed and gathered up his papers. "This is going nowhere. Maybe you'll be more talkative tomorrow after I arrest you for Jason's murder. Record off, Dave."

Ken got to his feet, preparing to leave.

"You don't mean that," she said pulling nervously on the chain holding her to the table. "I didn't hurt him, it was Ryder."

"Save it."

"It was Ryder!" she shouted at Ken's back as he reached the door. "The bastard was torturing the kid. I saved him. Do you hear me? *I saved him!*"

Ken didn't look back as he left.

Baxter labeled the disc, put it in a case, and dropped it into his jacket pocket. "Better get a lawyer, Chris."

"I haven't done anything. You believe me, don't you?"

Baxter shrugged.

"Don't you?"

\* \* \*

## **The Slam**

Baxter took Chris down to the holding area located beneath Central's main complex. It consisted of two levels: the lower level containing the cells, and the upper level containing prisoner processing and the computer centre. It was quiet at this time of night. There was still some activity of course, suspects were brought in at all hours, but when she stepped out of the elevator, she was relieved to find only a few faces she knew logging prisoners in. If she had come down here during the day, this level of Central would be chaotic at best. There would have been suspects shouting and cursing, police officers logging in their prisoners, others collecting prisoners for questioning, or bail hearings, or release. The room was brightly lit and white-painted, had grey-tiled floors, and glow panels around the top and bottom of the walls. It always smelled of disinfectant, which (although it made her nose itch) was better than the smell of vomit.

Prisoner processing was comprised of two distinct areas: pre-processing, and post-processing (called the cage because it was secure behind steel bars). On this side of the cage, there was a short queue of officers waiting to log in their prisoners. Guards stood alertly around the room with hands close

to their shock-lances. To her left as she stepped out of the elevator, doors led back up to the street outside. She looked at them longingly. Baxter noticed, and tightened his grip on her arm. He needn't have bothered. She would need a code to get through those doors, and her permissions had long since been erased from the system.

Baxter led her toward the cage and joined the queue. "You don't have to worry. You'll be in Isolation."

She laughed.

"What's funny?"

"You putting me in a cage with a bunch of shifters for my safety. Don't you think that's funny?"

Baxter frowned. "No."

It was strange, but she would be safer in the company of monsters than she would in a cell full of humans. If Baxter had tried to put her anywhere but Isolation, she would have been yelling the place down. They would have had to drag her there. An ex-cop's life wouldn't be worth spit if they put her in with a bunch of humans. Shifters were remarkably unbiased in some ways. They wouldn't care that she used to be a cop. All that would concern them was whether she was stronger than they were.

**Strength is very important. It dictates our place in the pack.**

"You want some advice?" Baxter asked as they waited their turn.

"Not particularly."

"Get an attorney."

She sighed. "You're repeating yourself."

"That's because you don't listen. Get an attorney. You need one."

"I don't need one. I'm not under arrest."

Baxter glanced at her briefly then back to what was happening ahead. "Yet." He pushed her forward another couple of steps as the queue slowly shortened. "You've been around long enough to know how things work, Chris. Don't

be stupid about this. Everyone down here needs an attorney, under arrest or not."

"You know what I think of those bloodsuckers. I've spent years fighting to put away the scum on our streets, and they spend all their time trying to stop me."

"That's history. It's gone. I'm talking about now. You need someone to look out for you. Ken is after your butt."

"He's just doing his job," she said, and shuffled forward again.

"Yeah, and he's made shifters his mission in life. You're a shifter now."

She shook her head. "He wouldn't do that. He's a good cop."

"He's still good at the job," Baxter agreed. "But he's changed since you went down. You saw him. Was that the man you knew?"

She remembered thinking how much Ken had changed, but *that* much? Surely not. Ken would never compromise his ethics just to send shifters down. Never. She had taught him to let nothing but the evidence rule his decisions. If he was suddenly targeting shifters, he had a good reason. Baxter was just being paranoid.

**What happens if he is not?**

"Ken's a friend. He was just doing his job."

Baxter shook his head, not realizing She was talking to Smoke. "Get a lawyer."

**But what happens if he is not?**

She frowned uneasily. "I think I'll make that call after all, Dave."

"Now you're talking. Come 'ere." Baxter jerked her roughly out of the line.

"Watch it, numb-nuts!" she squawked as she staggered.

Baxter dragged her toward the row of link booths. "I'm not letting you put it off until later. You'll make the call, with me listening, right now."

"Since when did you go all fatherly?"

Baxter's face reddened. "Since never. You bring it out in me, I guess."

She rolled her eyes. She didn't want to bring out latent parental instincts in him. She didn't want to bring out latent *anything* in him! Seeing as her credit chip had been confiscated with the rest of her stuff, Baxter inserted his chip into the link and authorized its use with his thumbprint on the scanner.

She punched in the number from memory and hoped she had it right. It took a while for him to pick up; he had probably been asleep.

"Lephmann."

"I need help."

"Chris?"

"Yeah it's me. I'm at Central, on my way to the cells."

"Who did you kill?" Lephmann asked intently. "I'll send Geoffrey to pay off the witnesses."

She gaped. "Oh that's nice. Assume I'm guilty, why don't you?"

"Aren't you?"

"Well, yes, but that's not the point. And anyway, where do you get off bribing witnesses?"

Baxter paled and stepped away so he couldn't overhear. What he didn't know couldn't get him fired.

"I do whatever it takes to help my people. We take care of own, and we punish them when the need arises. You should know that by now."

She remembered the arena at the old airbase, and her fight with Janine in the desert. Punishment among shifters was severe. "Yeah, okay, but you can't get away with bribing cops."

Lephmann swore. "Are you telling me you killed someone in front of the police?"

"No."

"Thank the goddess for *that!*"

She counted to ten under her breath. "I went after Ryder and caught him torturing Jason."

"The missing Kirkwood boy?"

"Right. The thing is, Ryder got away just as the police turned up. They caught me with Jason. They think I did all that stuff to him."

There was a brief silence, and then a whispered conversation in the background. She frowned intently, trying to make out the words, but she couldn't pick up enough for it to make sense. The other voice sounded feminine and familiar. Maybe Lephmann and Ronnie had a thing.

"Okay. I'll fix it," Lephmann said, sounding confident.

"Just like that, eh?"

"Just like that. I'll have you out by morning. Don't kill or torture anyone else."

"Hey..." She began indignantly, but Lephmann had already broken the connection. She looked at the handset in annoyance. "I *hate* it when people do that."

Baxter retrieved his credit chip, and they got back in line. When their turn came, he quickly filled out the forms and handed Chris off to one of the custody officers.

She watched Baxter heading for the elevator, and then turned back to Officer Lucas. He indicated an empty seat next to a wide shouldered Hispanic guy. Chris nodded to him and sat.

There were six other people under guard sitting with her, and she amused herself by trying to link faces to crimes. The holding area was the first stop for suspects. They could be here for any number of reasons, but the selection was poor and she had no difficulty figuring them all out. She could tell she was the only shifter in the group, but she wasn't the only woman. There was one other, a blonde wearing a cutaway top and body paint, an almost non-existent skirt, and very high heels. A hooker. She would lose the heels before long—they could be used as a weapon and wouldn't be allowed in the cells. The men were the usual run of gangbangers and drunks.

She sighed, already losing interest. "What's taking so long?"

Officer Lucas glared. "We're three short, now shut your hole."

She sighed again. Three short. They must be shipping prisoners down to the cells in groups of ten to save on shoe leather. She leaned back to see past her neighbor, but she couldn't tell what the hold up was.

"I'm Cyrus," the Hispanic guy suddenly said.

She looked him over. "Chris."

"Take a look at this."

"Look at what?" she asked warily.

The man unbuttoned his shirt. "This," he said, and pulled the shirt wide.

*This* happened to be a dragon tattoo. She had seen pictures of real dragons; this was nothing like them. She pretended to be interested as Cyrus explained its origin. About five minutes later, a pair of shifters joined their happy group. Both were women wearing scuffed leather jackets and tight leather pants—made for protection not for looking good. They were bikers, or at least, they rode motorbikes regularly enough to take it seriously. They bore a striking family resemblance to one another.

Cyrus was still talking. "...so I said I don't want no damn dragon, man, I want a sea serpent. I got me some great tats on my back too. I'd show you, but I don't think Officer Smile-a-lot would like that."

Lucas pretended not to hear, but his deepening scowl gave him away.

Chris grinned. "Yeah, better not strip off in front of us fems. We might not be able to control ourselves."

The hooker rolled her eyes.

Cyrus grinned. "You're my kind of girl, Chris. Got anything you want to show me?"

"I like tattoos, but only on other people."

"Damn shame." He rolled up a sleeve and turned to show her another tattoo. "This would look good on you."

It was a wolf's head. It was beautiful work, obviously done

by a true artist. She wondered if Cyrus knew what she was, but if he did he gave no sign of it.

"I've never seen better."

Cyrus looked down at it. "You really think so, you ain't just saying that?"

"I wouldn't do that. It's awesome."

"I did it."

"*You* did?"

Cyrus nodded. "Not the tattoo, but the design is mine. I do sketches in my spare time, and sell them when I can. I could do one for you if you like."

"What the hell are you doing in here when you can create something like that? You should have your own gallery or something."

Cyrus' lips thinned. "It's my wife. She was messing around, and she didn't care who knew it. I finally said I'd had enough and was going to leave if she didn't stop. She laughed at me and I... well, I sort of hit her. She called the cops and here I am."

"Idiot."

Cyrus looked down, shamefaced. "Yeah. Never happened before tonight, and never will again. I ain't going back there when I get out... *if* I get out."

"You will."

His face brightened. "You think so?"

She nodded. "I know so. I'm not condoning what you did, but I'm not one of those women who think it's always the husband's fault either. You've never been in trouble before, and you were provoked. No way will you get more than a suspended sentence. Maybe not even that."

"Christ I hope so," he said prayerfully, and crossed himself.

That surprised her. She hadn't met that many Christos. "You pray to the hanged god?"

Cyrus winced. "Jesus Christ is the *son* of God."

He said god with a capital G, as if his god was the only

one. Christos were all like that; they could be very strict about some things. Their clerics insisted their god was the best one, more than that, they insisted he was the *only* one. Not that they could prove it of course, not when there were so many clerics of other gods and goddesses running around doing miracles too. Flint was a Christo. She always wore a heavy gold crucifix around her neck—a sure sign she was one.

“He wasn’t hanged, Chris, he was crucified for our sins.”

*Bummer.*

**What is crucified?**

*It’s an old form of execution. They used to nail people to wooden crosses while they were still alive and leave them up there.*

**And humans call us monsters,** Smoke said, sounding disgusted.

“All right, enough chatter,” Officer Lucas said as another prisoner joined the group. “Ten’s your magic number. Everybody up.”

A guard opened the barred gate in the cage. Chris and her fellow prisoners shuffled through toward the elevator at the far end of the room. It was the only way down to the cells and was operated from topside. Once down there, there was no chance of escape. Chris was the last in; consequently, she was first out when the doors opened again.

The doors slid silently aside, to reveal a lot of blue-uniformed guards. A lot. Unlike those up top, these guys were not cops. They wore prison guard uniform, and were all armed like uniformed police officers on the street. The woman in charge of the guard detail was Simone Shipman. She had a bad reputation, or a good one, depending on which side of the bars you happened to be standing on.

Chris didn’t like her, and Shipman shared that feeling. She doubted Shipman would ever forgive her for instigating an official reprimand for overzealous use of force on one of her suspects. Shipman had been suspended during the investigation, and Chris had later proven the guy innocent of

all charges against him.

The guards took one look at Chris and reached for their shock-lances. Maybe they recognized her, maybe it was the cuffs she wore. It didn't matter. They knew she was a shifter.

She raised her cuffed hands. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! No need for that, I'm cuffed, see?"

Shipman's eyes glittered. "Well, well, look who we have here. It's Super Cop. You don't look so high and mighty now."

"Still on this side of the bars, Shiteman? I should have fixed that."

Muscles bunched at Shipman's jaw. "You missed your chance. I'm back from the little holiday you sent me on. I'll thank you for that later." She motioned with her shock-lance. "Step out. Move!"

Chris followed instructions to the letter, knowing Shipman was waiting for any excuse to use her little toy on her. The guards treated the other two shifters exactly the same way. Three guards apiece escorted them to Isolation, while Cyrus and the other prisoners were led away to their cells. Segregation of men from women, and non-human races from humans was standard procedure. Shifters and other monsters were always locked in Isolation—cages well away from human inmates. Letting monsters snack on humans was frowned upon. There was an entire wing dedicated to preventing that, and it saw a lot of use.

Chris led the other two shifters down the barren corridor. She knew the way, but that wasn't the reason. Shipman had decided to be part of the detail guarding her and had chosen to go first. Chris had a man on each side of her with shock-lances held ready, and Shipman in front about three paces ahead. She could have told them it was a stupid formation. She could easily have leapt on Shipman's back and twisted her head around, and the two at her shoulders were within easy reach of her claws. Not that she would hurt them, but it was the principal of the thing. If they were going to guard her, they

could at least do a good job of it.

They paused when they came to another barred gate. The guard on the other side looked hard at Chris and the other two women, before unlocking it. They trooped through and the gate slammed closed behind them. The guard re-locked it and then went back to his station. All the cages in Isolation were under twenty-four hour observation via the bank of screens at the security station. The cages were also locked and unlocked from there.

The guard sat and punched in a security sequence on the keyboard. "So, what have we got, Simone, more shifters?"

"Afraid so, Pat."

"I'm pretty full," Pat said, scratching his stubbled chin as he typed commands on the keyboard. He grunted as a list of inmates appeared. "Have to put them in Five. It'll be a bit crowded, but the others are already over capacity."

"Yeah? I don't remember sending that many down tonight."

"Nah. Nate sent them just before you came on. Something about a big gang fight outside one of the clubs. I've got the two sides separated, but they're packed in like sardines."

"Is that right? No one mentioned it."

Pat shrugged. "They're only shifters, not exactly big mojo around here. Not like that elf we had down here the other week. Now she was something special."

"I don't swing, Pat."

"Hey, when it's an elf, you don't care!"

Shipman snorted. "I wouldn't know, and neither would you with a belly like that."

Chris rolled her eyes and couldn't prevent a sigh escaping. Shipman spun and jabbed her in the belly with the lance. Chris grunted as her muscles convulsed. The pulse of electricity was powerful but of short duration. The pain faded leaving her muscles feeling as if they'd had cramp. It didn't hurt as much as she thought it should. She had been on the receiving end of a shock-lance at the academy; back then, she had gone to her

knees screaming. The training was supposed to teach her what the effects were, so she would know where to zap someone to make them cooperate. Shipman's eyes widened when Chris didn't react, and zapped her again.

Smoke snarled and tried to break out. She didn't care that doing so would make things worse. All she cared about was that they were under attack. Chris struggled to maintain control. Heat flooded through her and her skin crawled, but that could have been the effects of the shock-lance. She hoped so, because it felt very much like the Change starting.

*Calm down!*

Smoke snarled. **She is challenging us. We must fight!**

*This isn't the place for that. She isn't challenging anyone.*

*Shipman's just a sadistic bitch who gets off on hurting people.*

**That's even worse! She is sick. We must kill her for the good of the pack.**

She felt like agreeing, and Smoke gained from that momentary weakness. Chris felt her control slip a little more.

*Listen to me, Furface. She isn't like us, but even if she was, she's not part of our pack. We don't have one, remember? Let me handle this.*

Smoke reluctantly stopped fighting her, but she was watching intently.

Just as Chris was congratulating herself on her control of the situation, Shipman triggered her lance for a third time. Smoke howled, and Chris grunted. This time her knees felt a little wobbly, but she wouldn't give Shipman the satisfaction of dropping.

"That tickles," she forced herself to say, as the pulse of electricity passed through her body.

The bikers murmured to one another uneasily.

Shipman jabbed the lance forward again, but Pat pulled her away before it could connect. "What in the nine hells do you think you're doing? She's had enough."

"She's a troublemaker," Shipman snarled.

"Yeah, well, that's why she's in the slam. You won't have

to listen to her bitching all night, I will, so leave her alone, okay?"

Shipman shrugged him off. "Whatever you say."

Pat looked at her oddly, but then he nodded. "Put them all in Five."

Shipman glared at Chris. "You heard the man. Move!"

Chris was happy to. The sooner Shipman was out of her sight, the sooner Smoke would stop trying to take over and rip her face off. She preceded Shipman past the occupied cages. There were ten or twelve men in each one. The cages were made of steel tubing with reinforced cores to keep monsters in. The aisles between them allowed guards to keep watch and to prevent inmates from grabbing someone in another cage. Most non-humans were very strong. Especially vampires. There didn't seem to be any in tonight, but she knew the cages were proof against them, and magic too. Nothing ever got out of these cages except by the front gates, and they could only be unlocked from the security station.

She walked past cages full of shifter gangbangers, ignoring the appreciative growls and whistles. She wasn't sure if they were whistling at her or at her two leather-clad companions. Probably all three of them. Men—shifter or human it didn't matter—had a tendency to revert into little boys when locked up together, especially when a woman under sixty walked by.

**Not gangbangers. They are packmates.**

*Same thing.*

**It is not the same thing. Stop thinking like a human.**

*They look like gangbangers, and they act like gangbangers. That's good enough for me.*

Shipman stopped Chris outside one of the cages, and pushed her back against the bars with her lance. She didn't trigger a jolt.

"Unlock Five," Shipman yelled.

The stand clear alarm sounded, followed by the solid-sounding clunk of the lock disengaging. The gate sprang open. One of the guards removed the handcuffs from the

bikers and shoved them into the cage. He made to do the same for Chris, but when she held out her burned wrists, Shipman intervened.

"Not this one."

The guard frowned worriedly. "But the regulations..."

"Screw 'em. She's a troublemaker—troublemakers must be restrained for their own safety. I'll take responsibility."

Chris lowered her hands and walked into the cage with her head high. Her eyes darted around. It was overcrowded, but there was still plenty of room to walk around. There were fifteen women sitting or lying at their ease; some were asleep, others were watching her. The bikers were sitting on the floor with their backs against the bars near the gate. The only beds were already taken.

"Lock number Five!"

She watched Shipman go back to Pat. The other guards went for a coffee or something, and after a brief chat with Shipman, Pat followed them. Her eyes narrowed when Shipman grinned nastily at Pat's back. The bitch had talked him into letting her take over from him. Why?

She spun just in time to catch a leather-clad woman leaping toward her. Her turn had been instinctive, and she was lucky. She caught the biker's arm and twisted as hard as she could. Bone crunched, but the woman didn't make a sound. The other biker threw a punch, but she ducked away taking the hit on her shoulder. There wasn't time to make the Change. Even if there had been, she was reluctant. Smoke had no self-control when a fight was in the offing.

**I do so.**

"No you don't."

Besides, she was still wearing runecuffs. She didn't know what would happen if she risked changing. Her hands dropping off wouldn't be good though. None of the others in the cage seemed to care if she died or not, but at least they weren't trying to kill her too. They were watching avidly. Maybe they were fight fans.

She moved into some space, and waited for the bikers' next move. It wasn't long in coming. The two women moved apart in an effort to come at her from two directions at once.

**Break the chain.**

*Not yet.*

She pointed to the one on the left. "Smelly Dog?"

The woman grimaced. "Alley Dog, and you're dead meat."

Chris laughed. "You're funny." Were they simply taking advantage of Shipman's stupidity, or had they bribed her to look the other way? She studied the woman with the broken arm. "You're her sister?"

"What I am is none of your business, bitch. Can you fight as well as you run that mouth of yours?"

She smirked. "I like to know who I'm going to maim... oops, I already did that, didn't I? Sorry."

The biker snarled and leapt. Chris stepped aside, and looped her arms over the woman's head as she passed. The chain between the cuffs snapped tight around her throat, and a knee in the back put a stop to her struggles. The woman gasped as the silver-plated chain burned into her throat. Her good hand finally dropped to her side when she realized how close to suffocating she was.

"That's right," Chris said, moving back a couple of paces and putting her back against the bars. "Don't struggle or I'll snap your neck like a twig." The other woman seemed shocked and unsure what to do. Chris told her. "Take your boots and jacket off."

"My... my boots?"

"And the jacket." She watched the woman comply. "Put your legs in the arms of the jacket and pull it on as far as it will go."

"This is stupid," the woman snarled, but started to do as she was bid.

She supposed it was, but she couldn't think of anything else. It would at least slow the woman down. "When you're

done, sit in the corner with your butt on the jacket.”

The woman hesitated when she realized how confining that would be.

She pulled a little harder on the chain. “Do it, or baby sister here won’t see the sunrise.”

**What about the police?**

*Oh, now you’re thinking of consequences, are you? It’s about time! I’m not going to kill her, but I’ve got to make them think I will.*

“What’s your name?” she whispered in her captive’s ear.

“L-Lynsay,” the woman rasped.

“Well L-Lynsay. You’re in a mess now, aren’t you? What’s your sister’s name?”

“Ginger.”

She nodded. “How’s the arm?”

“It... it hurts.”

She leaned aside and pretended to look. “Nasty. It will probably heal twisted,” she said cheerfully. “You’ll be crippled. Oh well, that’s how it goes sometimes.”

“B-bitch,” Lynsay rasped.

Ginger shifted position, and Chris turned to face her more fully. She pulled harder on the chain. Lynsay squawked and scrabbled at her neck with her good hand. The chain was buried deep in her flesh, and her lips were starting to turn blue. Ginger settled back, but Chris didn’t let up on the pressure she was applying. Lynsay sagged, almost unconscious.

“Let her go—you’re killing her!”

She frowned. “I think she’s just faking.”

“She’s not,” Ginger said desperately. “For the Lady’s sake let her go, you crazy bitch!”

“Hmmm, let me think. No.”

“She’s turning *blue*,” Ginger said fearfully.

She checked, and eased up a little. Lynsay took a whooping breath. “Is she really your sister?”

Ginger nodded, not taking her eyes from Lynsay’s face. “I thought you knew that.”

"There's a resemblance, but I wasn't sure. If you don't make a move on me, I won't have to hurt her."

"Let her go."

She snorted. "Are you retarded?"

"I promise we won't attack you again."

"I can't trust your word."

"But I have to set her arm."

She shrugged. "If you don't?"

"I'll have to break it again later."

"I guess that's what you'll have to do then." Ginger's anger was palpable. Chris could see the hatred burning in her eyes. "Don't look at me like that. It's your fault your little sister got hurt, not mine. This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been so greedy for the bounty."

"What bounty?" someone asked, before Ginger could respond.

Chris turned to locate the speaker. "You talking to me, Red?"

The redhead stood and the others quickly moved out of her way. Chris' eyes narrowed at this evidence of authority. The woman was only average in height and looks except for her hair. It was her best feature, falling to her shoulders in natural waves. There was nothing extraordinary about her, but she had a presence that made everyone aware of her. She moved into the centre of the cage, and stopped so that she could survey her subjects. What was really strange was the way everyone accepted her leadership, as if she was royalty or something. Everyone except Chris.

**Feel that?**

*I feel it, who is she?*

Red glared at Ginger. "I *said* what bounty?"

Ginger pointed at Chris. "She killed Janine Duvitski. Raymond put a bounty on her head."

"She killed Janine?" Red asked sounding surprised. "This badly dressed girl did? I don't believe it."

Chris glared. "Hey, who are you calling girl, Red?"

Red ignored her. "Tell me what's been going on while I've been away."

Ginger nodded eagerly. "It happened at the last meeting at George, and—"

**You should ask what she is, not who.**

*All right, Furface, tell me.*

**She is alpha. It is her Presence that makes them do what she says.**

She frowned. *Presence? I don't understand.*

**Presence, strength, power...** Smoke said, sounding irritated. **What is so hard to understand about that?**

She shook her head. It was just some damn shifter thing. Another one she needed to ask Jonas about. She listened to Ginger spilling her guts, and tried to feel out Red's so-called Presence. She felt strong, and her strength had a solid feel to it. Ginger and Lynsay were nonentities in comparison.

*If she's alpha and so strong, why do I feel like kicking her butt instead of kissing it like the others?*

**We are alpha too,** Smoke said smugly. **We should fight her and prove we are the strongest. It is the way.**

She groaned. *Don't start. Just don't start, okay? I've still got my hands full with Lynsay.*

Red heard the groan, and turned towards her. "You wish to say something?"

"Listen, Red. I don't want to mess up this whole royalty thing you've got going, but I'm kind of in the middle of something here."

Red frowned. "My name is not Red, its Toni."

"Well, Toni, this is a real nice cage you've got here, but I'm not planning on staying. I'd like to get a little rest before I get out in the morning. So if you would go back to what you were doing, I'll just finish up with Ginger and her sister. I'm sure Lynsay doesn't want me holding her like this all night. Do you, Lynsay?"

"No," Lynsay gurgled.

Toni laughed. "You really are an obnoxious puppy. I'm not

surprised Raymond put a price on your head.”

She was getting tired of being spoken to as if she was a retarded child. “Call me puppy again, Red, and I’ll show you just how obnoxious I can be. As for Pederson, he’ll get his when the time comes.”

“You clearly don’t know him.”

“And I don’t want to. Now, are you going to move aside?”

“I move aside for no one, but I will make you an offer. Let Ginger help her sister and I’ll guarantee your safety until after you leave here.”

Chris frowned. It was a good offer, but why would Toni help her? She had no idea, but she had to do something with Lynsay. She had about five hours or so before Lephmann could get her out. She didn’t relish the thought of standing like this for that length of time.

“Why do that for me?”

Toni shrugged. “I’m not doing it for you. I’ve been away for quite some time, but Ginger and Lynsay are still my pack sisters.”

“You’re an Alley Dog?”

“I was, and I will be again. Their enemies are my enemies, but unlike them, I’m not foolish enough to kill you under the eyes of the police.”

Chris glanced at one of the cameras, and knew Shipman was watching. If Toni had known Shipman was on her side, she might well have attacked right then. Chris certainly wasn’t going to tell. Although a shifter’s emotions were a little harder to read than a human’s emotions, she could tell Toni wasn’t lying about her reasons. Chris decided to trust her word, and thought now would be a good time to break the chain on her cuffs. She tensed and jerked her arms apart. The chain snapped, and a loose link flew off to hit Toni on the chest.

“It’s a deal.” She pushed Lynsay toward her sister, sat down with her back against the bars, and closed her eyes gratefully. “Wake me in the morning,” she murmured and promptly fell asleep.

## **Techtron**

“Humber, Chris,” the officer said.

Chris yawned and got to her feet. She stepped up to the counter and leaned on it. “That’s me.”

He pushed a package toward her. “Check it. Sign here when you’re done.”

She ripped open the paper packaging and shook out her coat. The lab boys hadn’t cut it up after all. She had taken it off before the fight with Ryder, and it had been brand new before that, so there hadn’t been any blood or fibers to analyze. She was glad to have it back. She hunted anxiously for her link and her Dad’s old wallet, and breathed a sigh of relief when she found both in a plastic bag stuffed in a pocket with some loose change. They were fine. Shrugging into her coat, she dropped her link and other things into the pockets, and rolled the rest of her clothes into a tight bundle to carry more easily. After signing the forms, she went to join Lephmann.

“How did you do it?” she demanded to know when she reached him.

Lephmann looked around at the police officers. “Not here.” He led her outside toward an enormous silver limousine.

Geoffrey and Lawrence fell in behind her like the

bodyguards they were. She looked back and saw Ken standing alone on the steps watching her. He looked lonely and sad. She checked her stride to go back, but he turned and went inside.

“Chris?”

“Yeah... yeah I’m coming.” She turned her back on Central, and trotted to catch up with the others.

Lephmann held the rear door of the limo open for her. “I’ll explain on the way.”

She ducked into the car and discovered a passenger already inside. She recognized him as Myles Thorne, a top-flight defense attorney and enemy of homicide detectives everywhere. He was only about forty years old, but his silver hair made him look older. It gave him the look of an elder statesman; a style he had chosen to fool juries into trusting him, making them think he knew what he was talking about when in fact he was conning them into finding his clients innocent.

Chris preferred to sit facing forward, so she sat opposite Thorne. Lephmann sat next to her. Lawrence was driving; Geoffrey joined him up front.

“What’s he doing here?” she asked, as Lawrence maneuvered the huge car into traffic. “Tell me I don’t have him to thank for my release.”

“You know each other?” Lephmann asked.

Thorne smiled. “We’ve met a time or two.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” she said sourly. “Thorne used to spend his time releasing murderers back onto the streets. When he retired, we had a party at Central.”

Thorne chuckled. “I didn’t retire. I just lost interest in—as you put it—releasing murderers back onto the streets. I moved into corporate law. Techtron pays the bills these days.”

Lephmann nodded. “Myles has been invaluable to me and the Society. I asked him to help me get you out.”

She scowled; she didn’t like owing Thorne anything.

"Thank you."

Thorne laughed. "Hurts, doesn't it?"

She ignored that. "Ken threatened to arrest me for murder this morning, but now I'm free and clear with no charges. How did you do it?"

"I had very little to do with it. I suggested to David that he should concentrate on Jason Kirkwood. Being the only other witness besides yourself, he was in the best position to clear things up for you."

"But Jason is in a coma."

Thorne cocked his head. "Who told you that?"

"Ken... Lieutenant Hart told me during my questioning."

"Hmmm. Disinformation is a classic technique used to elicit responses from a suspect. I would have expected you to realize what he was doing."

She shook her head. "Ken is good."

"He must be. I've worked with David and others long enough to know that shifters are hard to fool."

"I would have sworn any oath you can name that he wasn't lying."

"Maybe he wasn't," Lephmann said. "If someone gave him false information, he wouldn't have been lying when he told you."

She eyed Lephmann speculatively. "Sounds like something you've done a few times."

"It has proven a useful technique a time or two."

Lephmann's too-innocent expression didn't fool her. He hadn't become so powerful by being a nice guy—or by telling the truth.

"So, Jason's not in a coma. How's he doing?"

"He died about an hour ago," Thorne said.

"Damn," she said sadly.

Jason hadn't been a saint by any stretch of the imagination, but she still felt bad about his death. If she had been quicker to connect Ed to Ryder, she might have broken the case well

before Jason fell into Ryder's hands.

**Jason was a fool. Don't blame yourself for his death. If he had not let himself be led by others into attacking Ryder, he would be alive today. If he had killed Ryder when he had the chance instead of just infecting him, he would be alive today. His choices are not your fault.**

*I know, Furface, I know, but no one deserves to be tortured like that. He held out for days to protect his friend. That's worthy of respect.*

"Did he say anything before he died?"

Thorne shook his head. "Nothing you don't already know. He made it clear that Ryder was the one responsible for his condition, but he couldn't tell us where to look for him."

"You were there then?"

Thorne nodded. "I was. David got us in as Jason's guild representatives. The doctors didn't want him to talk to us, but David persuaded them to wake Jason and let him make a statement to the police before they tried to treat him."

She frowned. "He didn't die because of the delay, did he?"

"No," Lephmann said firmly. "The doctors knew Jason was dying almost from the first moment he was admitted to the hospital. Ryder had him too long. The silver in his bloodstream had already done irreparable damage to his organs, especially his liver. The blood exchange might have prolonged his life and his pain by a day, but no more."

That was something. She didn't want Jason on her conscience too. She leaned forward a little to look out the window. "Where are we going?"

"Techtron first."

"Why?"

"We have a few things we need to discuss. You didn't contact Jonas like you promised. He got in touch with me when you didn't get back to him."

She reached for her link. "He was supposed to call me back, not the other way around."

Lepmann shrugged. "I don't know anything about that. I'm just passing on the message."

She checked her link's memory and discovered three missed calls. They were probably all from Jonas, but the numbers were blocked and she couldn't be sure. She would try to reach him at work—she still had the number Lawrence gave her—but not now.

"What was the message?"

"He asked me to say he needs to see you immediately."

"I'm not going all the way to Victorville without knowing what he wants. I'll call him."

Lepmann shrugged. "That's your concern, but Jonas is reliable."

"I'm sure he is, but I have things to do and places to be. None of them includes Victorville."

The Techtron Building was a huge glass and chrome needle towering many stories higher than its nearest neighbors. Chris watched as they drew closer and wondered what Lepmann's story was. It was common knowledge that he had once been a doctor and that he'd lost his position at Mercy Hospital when he was infected with lycanthropy, but what happened then remained a mystery. He'd simply shown up one day, the defender of non-humans, a man respected even by those who hated him.

The car paused before a security door. A second or two later, the huge shutter rumbled up and the limo proceeded down into the ground. Techtron's parking structure was huge. She wondered just how far down it went. The building was like a city unto itself with hundreds of corporations headquartered there. She wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the structure went down as far as it rose into the air.

The limo finally came to rest in parking reserved for Techtron employees.

She climbed out and looked around at all the cars. She had never seen such a display of wealth all in one place. There

were Ferraris, Jaguars, Porches, and Aston Martins parked side by side with the more prosaic Fords, Chryslers, and Toyotas. All of the cars, no matter their makes, looked shiny and expensive. A metallic blue Viper GTS caught her eye, and she went to check it out.

"What do you think of her?" Lawrence asked, joining her.

She stroked the glossy paintwork. "She's gorgeous. Yours?"

Lawrence nodded. "I'll take you out for a ride sometime."

"Maybe I'll let you."

"You can drive," Lawrence said slyly.

She grinned. "You're on."

Lephmann looked impatiently at his watch. Chris joined him in the express elevator just a short walk from the car. There were only two controls next to the doors and a lock. Lephmann inserted a key, turned it, and pressed the up button. The elevator surged upward. There were no stops; it was a private elevator for Techtron executives.

They sped smoothly up to the penultimate floor in the building. The 119th floor served as Techtron's corporate headquarters. Unlike other companies that sublet some of their floor space, Techtron used the entire floor and areas of the 118th and 117th floors as well. The company was a monster—the second largest in its field in the world.

She stepped out of the elevator and murmured, "A monster run by monsters."

"That's been said before," Lephmann said. "But most you will meet here are human."

"But not all?"

"No, not all."

"That's a neat trick... getting them to accept working with shifters I mean."

"It wasn't easy, but if we can't stamp out prejudice in a company we control, how will we ever do it in those we

don't?"

"You won't, you can't. You never will."

"That remains to be seen," Lephmann said tightly.

Stamping out such prejudice against non-humans was part of NSPCL's mandate. She had heard it quoted by newsies often enough to have the damn thing memorized. Stamping out prejudice was mentioned in the Society's charter right up there with the protection and succor of its members. It was a nice idea, but a naïve one. In her experience, people did not give up their fears easily, and those fears were the source of their prejudice. The real problem was, they were right to fear non-humans. The monsters weren't called monsters for nothing. Vampires fed on people, and lycanthropy was incredibly infectious. Fear was the most sensible emotion to feel in her opinion.

After saying a few words to Lephmann, Thorne left, and Lawrence did the same a minute or two later. She watched him go, a little put out that he hadn't said good-bye to her. She frowned at the direction of her thoughts and turned her attention to her host. David Lephmann was an important man. If she hadn't known it before, following him to his office would have put her straight. He was greeted with 'morning Mr. Lephmann' and 'nice to see you again Mr. Lephmann' at almost every turn. Her cynical side sneered at such obvious butt kissing, but Lephmann returned the greetings with a smile and a murmured response, using the greeter's first name each time.

She watched him walk his corridors of power and he never once failed to put those he spoke with at their ease. All of them left smiling and cheerful. She could sense who the humans were, and who the monsters were, but there were one or two people that didn't fit the nice little boxes she had prepared. She needed a third, and possibly even a fourth, box to accommodate them. Frowning, she watched Lephmann talking to one of them. The woman scowled at her for staring, but although the look could have blistered paint, it glanced off

Chris more or less unnoticed.

The woman's eyes and eyebrows were delicately slanted. She looked vaguely oriental, but she knew that impression was false. The woman definitely wasn't human. She had a long pretty face with high cheekbones and a chin that almost narrowed to a point. Her skin was fair and seemingly delicate, but from what Chris could see of her build, she was far from weak. Her makeup could have been professionally applied; the colors she had chosen suited her that well. She had white hair—white not blonde—and she wore it in a long intricate braid that reached all the way down to the small of her back. The dark grey jacket and skirt she wore spoke of a woman very much concerned with image. She wanted people to admire her, but at the same time, she wanted them to see someone competent at her job. In that, she reminded Chris strongly of Agent Flint.

**She is not one of us.**

*I know.*

**Yes, but she feels almost like one of us.**

*I got that too. Could she be another type of shifter do you think?*

**No. Flint is a different kind, but this one feels nothing like Flint. There is magic in her. She feels like a witch, only different somehow.**

*She's a puzzle all right.*

Lephmann took the folder the woman offered him, and nodded as she pointed out one or two relevant portions among the reports it contained. The gist of the conversation involved a profit and loss ratio; something about a billion dollars over estimate on a research project. Lephmann didn't seem dismayed, or even surprised by the figures. Chris shook her head at the amounts they tossed back and forth, and wondered how anyone could just shrug off that kind of loss.

Her attention wandered and she checked the time. She was at least eight hours behind Ryder, and she didn't even know where Sanctuary was yet. If Ryder knew where it was,

and went straight there, if he got to Marty before her...

*He had better not, that's all.*

Geoffrey wandered over to join her. "Take it easy. I know you must be impatient, but this is part of his job. No fighting is allowed here."

She frowned in confusion. "Who said anything about fighting?"

"I can tell you don't like Evelyn."

"Like her? I don't even know her."

Geoffrey frowned. "I thought... sorry. I jumped to the wrong conclusion. What do you think of her then?"

"I don't think anything of her. She just doesn't fit. She's not human—not completely. I know that. But she doesn't feel like a shifter either. What is she?"

"I really shouldn't say. Our abilities make it hard to hide anything from one another. That makes what little privacy we can maintain very precious to us. Just so you know, Chris, asking personal questions among us isn't done unless invited. It's the same for most non-humans by the way, not just shifters. Evelyn won't mind me telling you though; she doesn't bother to hide it."

"Hide what?"

"She's part fey."

She studied Evelyn with renewed interest. "Really?"

The Sidhe were incredibly protective of their privacy. Most stayed in Underhill and never left; they didn't like the modern world with its reliance on machines. The few that did venture out preferred to live in the wild forests, away from humans and their technology. Iron and steel warped their magic and made them sick.

"Her grandfather is a full-blood Sidhe warrior," Geoffrey went on. "He's ranked quite high in the Unseelie Court. He took a fancy to Evelyn's grandmother, and they had a child. It happens more than you would think considering their dislike for humans."

"She doesn't look like the pictures I've seen."

Geoffrey shrugged. "Her mother does, but Evelyn's fey blood is weaker. Most people think her mother is Sidhe. I've met her. Nice lady."

Lepmann gave Evelyn some final instructions, and handed back the folder. Evelyn smiled at Geoffrey, glared again at Chris, and went back to her office.

"Sorry about that," Lepmann said. "Let's get moving before something else happens."

Lepmann led the way through a pair of glass doors and introduced his assistant, Elaine Cunningham. Elaine was human, maybe fifty to fifty-five years of age, and was obviously very fond of her boss. She stood to greet him warmly when he entered. Chris took Elaine's hand for a firm handshake before following Geoffrey into Lepmann's office.

It was a huge room furnished with leather couches and chairs for entertaining business associates. The carpeting was luxurious and the desk looked antique. There was a computer and link combination placed at an angle on the desk just right of centre, a blotter dead centre, and a framed picture of Lepmann with his friends on the left. The view through the windows behind the desk was spectacular as if the entire city was there only for Lepmann's personal enjoyment.

She looked around and frowned when she noticed a spiral staircase in the corner of the office. What was such a thing doing in an ultra-modern edifice like the Techtron building? It seemed to be made of wrought iron and was probably another antique. It went through the ceiling to the floor above.

Geoffrey crossed the room to the bar near the staircase. He offered Chris a drink, but she shook her head and turned to look out the windows.

"Can I trust you?" she asked, taking in the view.

Geoffrey paused for just a second, and then dropped ice into a glass. "I don't think I've given you reason to question that."

**Be careful. He belongs to Lepmann.**

*He has his own pack though.*

**True, but he serves Lephmann just the same.**

"Can I trust you?"

There was suddenly a fruity scent on the air as Geoffrey poured his drink. She knew it from better days—Glenlivet. Mark had always preferred it to other malt whiskeys. She had never noticed it before, but it had a subtly spicy odor to it as well. She liked it. She turned and found Geoffrey watching her. He raised his glass, the ice clinking on the sides, and drank the richly gold liquid. It took a lot to intoxicate a shifter, but he wasn't trying to get drunk. He finished his drink and put the glass on the bar. He didn't pour another.

"My loyalties are my concern, and none of yours."

"Third time's the charm," she murmured. "Can I trust you?"

Geoffrey frowned. "You can trust me."

**He speaks truth.**

"I know where Ryder is going."

"Yeah?"

"Sanctuary."

Geoffrey's eyes widened.

Her grin was very brief. "I'm going after him." Geoffrey was already moving toward the door. She caught his arm and hauled him around to face her. "You said I could trust you."

"I've got to tell David and get over there."

"You said I could trust you!" she snapped, her eyes blazing in anger.

"Yeah, but..." Geoffrey looked worriedly at the door and then back at her. "Yeah, okay. I know I'm going to regret this, but what do you need?"

She closed her eyes briefly and forced herself to calm down. The anger at Geoffrey's almost betrayal had just flared up from nowhere. Her emotions were always close to the surface these days, especially violent emotions. No matter how many times she told herself to be careful, her volatility always caught her by surprise.

She released Geoffrey's arm. "Marty Preston and his

girlfriend are hiding out at Sanctuary, and Ryder knows it. Where is it?"

"Wyoming. We have to tell David. He can have the entire area locked down. Ryder won't get a sniff of the place. "

Wyoming. She hadn't expected that, but now that she thought about it, it raised the odds in her favor. Ryder was one of the FBI's most wanted. He couldn't just hop on a plane or a train to get there. He would have to drive. Her smile turned feral. She would get there ahead of him and be waiting.

"I don't want that, Geoffrey. Listen, now you know he's at Sanctuary, can you find out *exactly* where Marty is?"

"Easily, but you shouldn't go in alone. I'll go with you and take care of Ryder."

"No! He's mine. It's my right, Geoffrey, mine!"

He nodded reluctantly.

"I'll need a few things."

"Like what?"

She told him.

Smoke wasn't happy with the plan, but they had tried everything else. They had both failed miserably to take Ryder down and they weren't eager for a repeat performance. It was time they stopped pussyfooting around with this guy, and her plan at least had the merit of being new. Ryder wouldn't expect it of her; she was almost sure.

**Almost?**

*Would you expect it?*

**No, but he's a tricky one. If he sniffs us out, he'll be gone before we can do it.**

*Yeah, well, I have you in reserve, don't I?*

**Always.**

"Can you meet me there with the info and the things I'll need?"

Geoffrey nodded enthusiastically. "Can do."

She squeezed his arm. His acceptance was a great weight lifted from her shoulders. "Thanks. I won't forget this."

"You better not. I'm expecting at least dinner out of it."

"You got it."

Lepmann came into the office, still talking to Elaine. He refused a drink when Geoffrey offered one, and sat at the desk to consult his schedule on the computer.

"Hmmm, cancel it," Lephmann said, and Elaine made notes as he continued down the list of appointments. "Cancel, cancel, cancel, Jerry can do that one, cancel, reschedule. Ask Alex to take care of these two for me, would you? Cancel, reschedule, reschedule... damn! Reschedule, but tell them this doesn't let them off the hook. I still want answers. They've had more than enough time already. The extra week will give them time to polish it until it gleams. The package had better be damn good."

"Got it," Elaine said. "What about the governor's little junket?"

"Cancel."

"You can't cancel someone else's party, David!"

"Reschedule?" Lephmann asked hopefully, but Elaine just shook her head. "Oh, all right! I'll make myself available."

Elaine turned to Geoffrey. "You make sure he doesn't forget. Put him on the flight and sit on him if you have to."

"Yes, ma'am," Geoffrey said.

Elaine sniffed in satisfaction and marched back out to her desk.

Lephmann watched her go then clapped his hands together. "I'm free for the week!"

Geoffrey grinned, but then sobered after a glance at Chris. "I have to leave."

Lephmann frowned. "Oh?"

"I have this thing. Shouldn't take long, but I don't want to hold you up. I'll meet you at Sanctuary."

"You're leaving now?"

Geoffrey nodded.

"Is there anything I can do?"

Geoffrey shook his head. "Pack business."

"I see. Well, I'll still have Chris and Lawrence for company."

I'll see you there."

Geoffrey nodded and hurried away.

Lephmann indicated Chris should precede him up the spiral stairs. "I had the elevators blocked from this floor. This is the only way up."

Chris stepped off the last stair and looked around the room. It was someone's living room. She removed her coat and draped it over the back of a chair.

"Do you live here?"

"Sometimes, but it isn't home. We get together here in the evenings occasionally. My apartment's through there," he said, nodding at the door. "Ronnie has one down at the end of the hall and Lawrence is opposite me. A few of the others stop in from time to time. There's plenty of room."

"Why?" Chris asked.

"Why what?"

"Why bring me here, why tell me all this?"

"I brought you here because we need to talk. There's nowhere more private outside of Sanctuary itself."

"Sanctuary," she mused, wandering the room. "You said that before."

Lephmann took a seat. "That's right. Sanctuary is just what it sounds like, a place of safety. I'll take you there and teach you a few things."

Everyone seemed to think she needed to learn a few things, and maybe she did, but it was starting to irritate her the way they kept rubbing her nose in it. She wasn't a child. She didn't need people telling her what to do or how little she knew all the time.

"How far away is this place, and what kind of things?"

"It's in Wyoming, and all kinds of things."

The odor of roses and freshly showered man wafted to her as Lawrence entered through the door Lephmann had earlier pointed out. He had changed clothes and his hair was still wet from the shower. He must have used a rose scented soap. Farris, Lawrence's beast, normally lent him a scent that reminded her

of roasting chestnuts. She remembered Farris in the desert outside George AFB, and Smoke growled appreciatively.

**A fine mate he would make, for both of us.**

*I do like him, but I'm not looking for a mate.*

**I am.**

Her eyes followed Lawrence as he left the room via another door. He really did have a great butt. The rest of him wasn't bad either. He probably hit the gym a lot. Smoke was right, he was hot. She caught sight of copper pots and pans hanging on hooks before the door closed behind him. That was interesting too. Most people simply programmed a replichef and left real cooking to the professionals. She shook herself and turned her attention back to Lephmann. He was still waiting for a response.

"Sorry, I got distracted." Lephmann smiled in amusement, and Chris felt her cheeks heating. "What do you want to teach me?"

"There's controlling the Change, and..."

She let him ramble on about Sanctuary and the lessons he intended to teach her, but the photographs hanging on one of the walls caught her eye. She crossed the room to investigate them. All of them featured Lephmann doing something in strange places. Sometimes Lawrence and Geoffrey were with him, but mostly it was Lephmann and Ronnie. She wondered if they were an item. Amongst all the photographs, there was a single painting. She recognized a younger-looking Lephmann standing with a tall man with intense eyes. It was Stephen. The pale woman seated in front of them was Marie Sterling; she looked sad.

The picture had a very disturbing quality about it, especially as it was the only painting amidst so many photographs. It drew the eye strongly. Chris stared into Marie's eyes and shivered. Had Marie just been informed of her father's death, had she just been murdered? The thought of dying and awakening as a vampire sent chills down her spine. It must have been a terrible shock for the girl, surely worse

than her own transformation into a shifter.

“Chris?”

“Hmmm?”

Lepmann shook his head ruefully. “You haven’t heard a word I’ve said. Look, you must be hungry. Let’s continue this after you’ve eaten. I hope you like pancakes, because they’re Lawrence’s favorite breakfast.”

“Love ’em,” she said, and forced herself to look away from the painting. “I really should get in touch with Jonas and find out what he wants.”

Lepmann stood. “Do that first then. Join us in the kitchen when you’re ready.”

He left her alone to make the call.

Chris delved into the pocket of her coat and retrieved her link. She dropped into a chair, before trying to contact Jonas. He picked up on the first ring.

“Chris?”

“Yeah, it’s me, what’s up?”

“Where the hell you been, girl? I’ve been trying to get you for ages.”

She sighed. “In the slam.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” she said sourly. “What have you got for me? Good news, I hope.”

Jonas snorted. “Depends on where you’re standing, but the bounty on your head has been withdrawn. I talked to Raymond for you. The sonofabitch didn’t want to know at first, but I talked him around.”

“To death, more like. Get on with it.”

“I’m getting to it! I talked him into letting you take your place as his mate.”

She frowned in consternation. That didn’t sound like a good thing, not at all. “I thought you were trying to help me get out of this.”

“I am and this will. Look, Raymond hated Janine’s guts, but she was the strongest bitch in his pack. He was stuck with

her as his mate. He doesn't care that you killed her. That isn't the reason he put a price on your head."

"It's not?"

"No. I think if it was all up to him he would thank you and let you walk, but it's not. The pack—especially the bitches—wanted him to do something because you dissed the Alley Dogs. You showed contempt for them when you killed their alpha and just walked away. If you had taken her place in a formal challenge that night, none of this would be happening. Understand?"

She raised an eyebrow at Jonas' strange logic. "No."

Jonas sighed. "It's like the difference between self-defense and murder. Challenging someone for his position is normal among us. It's not something we get upset about."

"I'll take your word for it. What do we do?"

"You take your place by Raymond's side, and he'll make sure you get challenged by the right bitch. All you have to do is lose. The winner becomes Raymond's new mate, and you walk away free and clear. Simple."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Simple, huh? Are you out of your tiny little mind? I could get killed!"

"Don't worry, the fix is in. All you have to do is make it look good before you go down. When can you be here?"

"I dunno, Jonas. This sounds iffy to me."

"It's this way or no way, girl. The bounty will only get bigger the longer this goes on."

"You said you fixed that!"

"Temporarily, yeah."

"*Temporarily*, you never said anything about it being a temporary fix."

Jonas sighed. "The impossible I can do, but miracles I leave to the Lady. Raymond will put the bounty back if you don't do this. He'll have to."

She rubbed her temples. She didn't know what to do for the best. She didn't like this plan, but she didn't have a better one. As sure as up was up, another shifter would try to take her

before long. How many more could she fight before making a fatal mistake?

**As many as it takes. I will protect us.**

*I know you'll try.*

She sighed. "What would you do, Jonas?"

"I'd go with it, or run... maybe change your name and face."

"I told you before. I don't run."

"I figured. That's why I pushed for this solution."

Sanctuary would be chock-full of shifters, any one of whom could try for the bounty. She couldn't let that happen. She had to get this out of the way before she went after Ryder.

*What do you think?*

**I think Jonas has done his best. I don't like the thought of losing a fight on purpose, but I will if you want me to.**

She felt Smoke's sincerity, and was touched by it. It wasn't the first time Smoke had said she wanted to help, but it was the first time Chris believed her without reservation.

She frowned, not sure what that said about her. Was she a sucker for putting herself in a position where only Smoke could get her out? She didn't think so, and that *definitely* said something had changed in her thinking.

**You are beginning to trust me,** Smoke said in satisfaction. **It's about time.**

*Don't spoil it.*

"Okay, Jonas. When do I have to do this?"

"Good, girl. There's a meeting at George tonight. We'll do it then, but I need you here as soon as you can. I have a few tricks I want to show you before the challenge starts."

"Tricks," she mused. "I have a feeling I might need some."

"You'll be fine."

"I'll see you in about an hour."

"Good," Jonas said and broke the connection.

She switched off her link and went to tell Lephmann that

she had to leave.

\* \* \*

## **Lessons**

Chris allowed Lawrence to accompany her to McNally's after he bribed her with the keys to his car. She had been halfway convinced already, but the thought of driving a 1997 GTS clinched it. Back when the Viper was built, there had been no such thing as AI traffic controllers, but more importantly, speed limiters had yet to be widely accepted in road vehicles. As a result, Chris opened the Viper up as soon as they hit open roads secure in her freedom from an automatic speeding fine. It was a noisy and jarring ride, but it handled so much better than her old official police vehicle. She loved every minute of it. So did Smoke. The wolf was a speed freak too; a lucky thing considering how fast they reached Victorville.

Lawrence pointed. "There it is."

She nodded and checked her rear-view before pulling into the oncoming lane to park outside McNally's. A guy blew his horn, annoyed that she had stolen the space before he could get to it. She ignored him and revved the Viper one last time just for the pleasure of it before shutting off the motor.

"Fun?"

"Fun," she agreed. "I want one."

"It'll cost. They're not cheap or easy to come by nowadays."

The conversion to hydrox cost me almost a year's salary on top of the asking price."

She winced. She didn't have a salary. Oh well, maybe a fast bike would satisfy Smoke. "I was wondering about that. Where is it?"

"In the tank. It reduced the capacity, but I didn't want it on show under the hood."

"Good choice."

The elves had forced the switch from gasoline to hydrox after proving pollution really did cause holes in the ozone layer. They said they were fed up with cleaning up after humans with their magic, and that they would stop doing it, letting the holes grow out of control, unless all the nations of the world adopted hydrox and other non-polluting manufacturing techniques. After all, they didn't need the ozone layer; their magic would protect them and they had Underhill. When the world's governments realized the elves were serious, they quickly adopted hydrox and the new industrial working practices. Such things had been around for a while, but had been considered too expensive to adopt. That thinking changed almost overnight when the elves stopped spelling the holes closed and cases of skin cancer skyrocketed.

Chris handed Lawrence his keys after locking up, and together they entered McNally's Doughnut Shop. Bright and cheery colors greeted them. Pastels were the in thing in Victorville it seemed, though Jonas hardly seemed the type to go for so much pink. His boss obviously disagreed, because the entire place was very light pink. Even the tiling on the floor followed the theme with its checkerboard pattern of alternating pink and white tiles. Customers sat at the tables nibbling on frosted doughnuts, chocolate doughnuts, doughnuts with sprinkles on them. The smell was indescribably good, and her stomach grumbled. She could eat a dozen or so about now. Androids supplied coffee and soft drinks, but there were a couple of living breathing waitresses too. Chris wondered if Jonas baked, or served tables. She sniggered at the image of a

coyote-man serving customers with coffee.

Lawrence looked askance at her. "What's the matter?"

She composed herself. "Nothing. Where's Jonas?"

"Behind the register."

She followed Lawrence deeper into the shop and noticed all the customers were human. She wondered what they would say if they ever learned that Jonas wasn't—nothing good that was for damn sure. His boss must be an exceptional person to allow him to work here; the authorities would close him down in a hot second if they found out. The Food Safety Commission didn't have a sense of humor. Lycanthropes were forbidden to serve or prepare food for human consumption, and neither were they allowed to frequent establishments where humans consumed food and drink—not even bars and clubs officially, though most proprietors of such places were lax in keeping their wards and spellcheckers up to date. Magic was damned expensive, and new solutions for bypassing wards were coming on the market all the time.

She turned and noted the faded runes around the door. Typical... and lucky. If they had been working, they would have lit up like a fourth of July celebration when Lawrence and she passed them.

Jonas wore a white and pink striped uniform including a paper hat displaying the McNally's logo. Stitched in blue thread over the pocket on his chest was his name. He was chatting with a customer, an elderly man. Chris couldn't help imagining Jonas' other form wearing the uniform. She laughed quietly at the absurd image that popped into her head. The customer turned to look at her worriedly, perhaps wondering from which asylum she'd escaped. She grinned at him, and he turned back to Jonas for his change.

"Have a nice day now," Jonas called, as the old guy hastily left, and then scowled at Chris. "Nice going."

She cleared her throat, forcing the giggles down. It was quite hard to do when Jonas stood there in his pink outfit looking all affronted.

"Sorry, Jonas, I'll try not to laugh, but you look so cute in your uniform."

"It ain't funny. If he got even a whiff of the truth, he'd have us closed down."

"I said I'm sorry. I can't help it if your boss has a weird sense of style. I didn't choose the color scheme."

"I chose it, its good camouflage."

That startled her. She hadn't considered he might *want* to look that way.

Jonas snorted in disgust at her start of surprise. He waved one of the waitresses over to take his place on the register, and showed her through the kitchen and into another room at the back of the shop. It was a storeroom. Jonas started stripping off his uniform.

"You're McNally?"

"That's my name, what of it?"

She shrugged. "Just... no one told me that's all." She watched him pull on jeans and a jacket. Suddenly he looked the way she imagined he should—hard-faced and competent. "Are we going somewhere?"

"I have a place we can work. It's not far. Your car will be fine where it is, Lawrence. No one will touch it. My boys across the street will see to that."

Lawrence nodded as if expecting nothing less.

Jonas led them back into the kitchen and through the rear fire escape to his pickup parked in the lot out back. It had a McNally's logo on its door.

She climbed in, and the two men sandwiched her between them. It was like sitting between a pair of blast furnaces. Shifters had higher metabolisms, a temperature that would indicate a dangerous fever in a human was normal for them; they felt the cold more acutely. She sighed contentedly, and snuggled deeper into their warmth.

Jonas drove them across town. He turned into an industrial park and threaded the pickup between industrial units until he reached R&J Autos. The heavy-duty and reinforced shutter

was open part way, giving Chris a glimpse of the power ramps and cars inside.

“Friends of yours?”

“What?” Jonas said, preparing to climb out.

“R&J,” she said, nodding up at the sign.

“Ryan is one my boys. John is his brother, not pack but he’s cool.”

So, Ryan belonged to Jonas’ pack. She remembered Danyelle mentioning that Jonas led one of two big local coyote packs. How many living among Victorville’s small population ran around on four feet at night?

“You coming?” Jonas said, heading for the half-open shutter.

“Yeah, yeah. Hold your horses,” she muttered, sliding out of the pickup and following him inside.

Chris was sweating and her legs felt shaky as she trotted around the garage, hurdling the cars. Jonas had worked her non-stop since they arrived at R&J Autos. Ryan and his brother had gone home hours ago—Ryan to get some sleep before the meeting at George, and John to take his wife out for a meal. It was their second wedding anniversary. Sometimes it was hard for her to remember there were people out there with ordinary lives, lives not connected to her, or dead werewolves in the desert.

Change upon change upon change, Jonas had demanded. Demanded, and received. Can you do this, Jonas would say. She could. Can you do that? Yes, she said, but it hurts something awful. Do it anyway, he insisted. She did, and spent minutes screaming in agony. Jonas said it was his intention to teach her what she was capable of, and then teach her how best to use her abilities to beat someone who might, possibly, be even stronger than she was. Tricks he called them. Insanity was more like it.

Jonas had forced her to test her endurance and then pushed her beyond it—way beyond. It had opened her eyes to

what she was. She was super human! Or maybe that should be super non-human.

She could run for miles without slowing or tiring, and sprint to over forty miles an hour. She'd done it, so she knew. Jonas was even quicker. She could smash holes in walls, though she doubted there would be time if she ever really needed to escape someone that way—it took a lot of punching. Jonas promised Ryan they would pay for the repairs. She could climb almost anything, even sheer walls as long as there were finger and toe holds, and jump from one roof to another twenty and more feet away. She'd done that too.

Apologizing profusely, Jonas had punched her in the face, just to show her how alphas could use their greater control of the Change to heal damage. She had thought Lawrence was going to kill Jonas when his second punch broke her cheekbone. Lady that had hurt, as did the rapid healing, but it was a trick worth knowing. She might forgive Jonas one day for not telling her what he was going to do.

As with all things, there was a limit to her strength, and Jonas found that too. She was flagging now, ready to collapse at the first hint that he was satisfied with her. She kept herself upright by will alone, panting and shaking as she was. She leapt over another car, but her foot clipped it and she sprawled over the roof. She lay still, panting and letting the last of her strength drain out of her. She was done.

"You aren't listening!" Jonas snapped.

Anger gave her enough strength to scramble up. "Screw you!" she screamed into his face from less than a pace away. She spun and kicked an old hood leaning against one wall, denting it. "I've had enough. You hear me? I've had it!" She punched the rusted hood over and over until blood smeared the puke-yellow paint, and her knuckles throbbed.

Lawrence came toward her.

"Back off!" she snarled. "I don't want any of your sympathy. I've done everything he told me to do, *everything!* Change your hand, Chris. Change your other hand, Chris.

Change back, Chris. Change, change, change. It fucking hurts, all right?"

"I know it does."

She slumped onto the dirty concrete. "I'm tired, I'm sweating like a pig, and I smell... *shit!*" Suddenly she was crying. She rocked back and forth and let the tears flood out.

Lawrence shuffled his feet.

Jonas was more practical. He dragged her up and held her until she ran out of tears. "You'll do."

"Wh-what?" she hiccupped, using her cuffs to dry her eyes.

"I said you'll do. Let's get you cleaned up and fed. You have about four hours to rest before the meeting."

She nodded wearily, and let Jonas carry her to the pickup. She was asleep before he reached it.

As before, the hanger at George AFB welcomed Chris with light and a multitude of voices, but there weren't as many vehicles parked outside this time. Jonas and Pederson had hastily arranged the meeting, and most packs had no interest in what, to them, was an internal matter of concern only to the Alley Dogs. Jonas' pack, *the Desert Warriors*, and Leon's pack, *the Ghost Hunters*, were in attendance and far outnumbered the Alley Dogs. They had come in their entirety at Jonas' urging.

Chris entered the hangar bracketed by Jonas and Lawrence, and stopped to survey those who would be her enemies. No one noticed her at first, and conversations continued punctuated by the odd burst of laughter. Unlike last time, the party atmosphere was entirely absent, the laughter was a little nervous, glances were furtive, and conversations over-loud. Jonas and Leon's people had stationed themselves all round the hangar, keeping the walls to their backs. They were like a living barrier, a breathing corral meant to keep the peace and the wolves inside.

In her mind's eye, she saw Smoke pacing back and forth

in agitation.

*What's wrong?*

**Everything about this is wrong. We should go. We shouldn't have come here. It's a trap; it feels like a trap. This is wrong, wrong, wrong.**

She frowned.

It was true that she would prefer to be on her way to Wyoming, but a trap? Jonas had insisted that this was the only way to satisfy the Alley Dogs and get them off her back. She trusted his judgment, even though she didn't like the plan he had proposed. She was past debating its merits; she just wanted to get it over with.

*We'll be okay.*

**Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong...**

Someone finally noticed the newcomers standing by the door. Conversations chopped off mid-sentence as friends nudged each other and turned to look. Silence and turning heads spread through the hangar like a wave. She straightened at the hostility she saw in most of the looks aimed her way, and her resolve strengthened. No, Jonas was right; there was no backing out of this. It needed resolution now, or she would become another statistic at the morgue.

She took the lead, this was her fight to win or lose, but Jonas and Lawrence declared where their sympathies lay by staying close and guarding her back. She marched toward Pederson standing alone upon the bloodstained arena floor. Murmurs and whispered comments arose in her wake. Opinions regarding her chances of living out the night—not very good most agreed—was a popular topic, and in a couple of instances she saw money changing hands. Odds were not in her favor. If she hadn't known the fight was rigged, she might have bet on herself winning. As it was, she mourned the lost opportunity for making some much-needed cash and walked on.

Pederson was standing in the centre of the arena waiting

for her. She joined him, leaving Jonas and Lawrence standing at the chalked boundary line.

“Quiet!” Pederson roared, making Chris jump. That caused some laughter, and Pederson glared at those responsible. The noise died away. “You all know why we are here. This woman killed my mate, and now comes to take her place among us. Janine was your alpha, you all have a say in this.”

Pederson ceded the floor and stepped out of the arena.

She had rehearsed her speech in front of Lawrence and Jonas before the meeting, but speaking in front of a large crowd—a hostile crowd at that—was much harder. She took a deep breath and tried to speak slowly.

“I killed your alpha in a fair fight. She challenged me on the night of the full moon last. As is my right, I claim her place among—”

“I dispute your claim!” a woman shouted, angrily stalking through the crowd and into the arena. “I say you lie! I say you killed Janine, but not in a fair fight. You murdered her!”

The woman had played her part so well, that Chris backed up looking frantically for Jonas. She found him standing calmly among the crowd lining the sides of the arena. He nodded to her reassuringly. This then was the woman Pederson had chosen to be his new mate. This was the one she was supposed to lose the fight to. The woman had Presence, but it was nowhere near as strong as Jonas’. She might be alpha, but if she was, it was by the skin of her teeth. She could take the woman easily, she was sure of it.

**Yes easily, but we must not.**

*Yeah.*

“Who are you to say I lie?” she asked, trying to sound affronted when all she really felt was nettled. She was wasting time here; time she could be using to chase Ryder.

“My name is Loren Duvitski. Janine was my *sister*,” the woman spat, her loathing for Chris evident in every word. “Janine would never have challenged you, or harmed you. The ritual of the First Change is ancient. All know it is a test of

skill, no more. You had no call to kill her. It *was* murder.”

*Sister!*

Her thoughts reeled. Why would Janine’s sister be a party to this farce? Why would Pederson choose Loren for this fight... no wait. By choosing Loren, he wasn’t just choosing her to fight; he was choosing his next mate. Had Loren and Pederson been two-timing Janine all along? Maybe she was crazy, but it felt right to her. If she’d had a sister killed, there was no way she would be a party to helping the killer.

She scrambled to catch up. “I ah... I didn’t murder her. Your sister attacked me. She said she wouldn’t let me take her place. When I said I didn’t want her place, she called me a liar and tried to kill me. I defended myself and she died.”

“Liar!”

She spun in place to search the crowd for the owner of the new voice. Jonas was anxiously doing the same. This was not in the script. The crowd parted and Toni pushed her way through.

“Oh crap,” she said under her breath.

**I told you! I told you it was a trap.**

*So you told me. What do you want, a medal? We can’t run away forever.*

**She is strong,** Smoke said anxiously. **Very strong. We could have beaten Loren easily, but Toni... I don’t know. She feels too strong. I... I don’t know if we can win.**

*I guess we’ll find out.*

Jonas was frowning worriedly. Pederson looked shocked, and pissed. He stepped forward to bar Toni from entering the arena. Chris backed up so she could watch Loren and Toni together. She didn’t like the way this was going; she wouldn’t put it past Toni to have set her up to fight both of them.

“You cannot interfere with a challenge once it has begun,” Pederson said. “Stay out of this.”

Toni smiled. “It’s good to see you again, Raymond. I was sorry to hear about Janine. If there is anything I can do?”

Pederson grunted something noncommittal.

"Be a dear and step aside. The challenge has yet to be spoken, and besides, this is a matter for bitches to decide. By rights, you shouldn't even be here."

"Janine was my mate!"

"And she was my friend. It makes no difference here and now. The females choose who will be alpha over them, just as the males do. It has always been that way. Always has been and always will be. Mate with the one we choose, or step down as alpha male. That is the law."

"That is the law," everyone murmured together.

No, not everyone. It was the women that had responded. The men seemed to be fading back a little, letting the females take their places close to the arena. Chris watched as some of the men began slipping out the door. Pederson might not realize it, but it was a done deal as far as the other men were concerned. She didn't know squat about shifter customs and traditions, but one thing she knew: she wanted Jonas and Lawrence to stay.

More and more Alley Dogs slipped away to wait outside, leaving the women behind. Jonas didn't move, and his people took their stance from him. Leon slipped up behind Jonas and whispered something. Jonas shook his head and crossed his arms, obviously intending to stay. Leon joined him on the boundary line, but did not copy his 'I'm-not-moving' stance. He looked very uncomfortable flanked by so many women, and seemed on the verge of apologizing or bolting into the night. Maybe both.

"It's Loren's right to challenge her sister's killer," Pederson argued.

The audience murmured their agreement, and Chris' eyes narrowed. So, that's why the other women had allowed someone as weak as Loren to fight her. Pederson had found a way to use Loren's relationship to his dead mate to get his way. Maybe he hadn't been two-timing Janine after all. He might simply have seen an opportunity to make Loren his mate and taken it. Loren was much weaker than Janine was, and maybe

more pliable? Toni was by far the strongest woman here, but she was from out of town. She'd said so that night in the cages below Central. Chris doubted Pederson had expected a face from the past to turn up and interfere in his plans.

"I do not dispute that," Toni said. "I will simply challenge the winner of this fight."

Chris swallowed sickly.

Loren paled and babbled, "I withdraw my challenge! You can have her, Toni... I mean, Janine was your friend. She would want you to avenge her and..."

"Hush now," Toni said to Loren as she hastily vacated the arena. She smiled at the now glaring Pederson. "Oh dear, it looks like I'll have to challenge Janine's murderer after all."

"Hey!" Chris snarled, letting her anger build. Jonas had taught her that a shifter's anger had uses. When controlled, it made the Change quicker. "I don't like being talked about as if I'm not here. If you're going to fight, Red, let's get it on... or is it your plan to bore me to death?"

Toni laughed. "It's a shame the circumstances are what they are. Had you not killed Janine, I might have liked you."

"Yeah, we could have been bosom pals," she said sarcastically.

Toni nodded seriously. "Perhaps so."

"Whatever. Are you coming in to play?"

"In a moment." Toni turned back to Pederson. "I choose to allow you to stay. To be fair, I'll allow Chris' men friends to stay as well. All other males must leave."

That wasn't many by now. Most of the male Alley Dogs had already slipped away. Leon was glad to go, and he took his people with him. Jonas nodded to his pack brothers to follow Leon out. That left Pederson, Jonas, and Lawrence as the only men among two hundred or so women.

Toni stepped into the arena and fell easily into a fighting stance.

*Oh, crap.*

"Karate?"

Toni smiled. "Jujutsu. Karate is for losers."  
"Oh," she said weakly.  
*I am so dead.*

\* \* \*

## **The Arena**

Chris backed and circled. Toni watched her calmly, pivoting to keep her in view. Chris tried to think of a way out of the fight. She hadn't done any serious training in years. She had even let her once-weekly trips to the gym slide these past few weeks. What with one thing and another, keeping fit hadn't seemed important anymore.

"What are the rules?"

Toni frowned. "Rules?"

"Yeah, you know—rules. Like no gouging or biting. First to say uncle loses—stuff like that."

Toni's face brightened, and she stood straighter, lowering her guard. "Ah. I forgot you're supposed to be new. Very well, the rules, such as they are: I win when you're dead—"

"I don't suppose you would let me forfeit the fight and walk out of here," she broke in, edging closer.

Toni glared at the interruption. "I don't suppose I would. You have to pay for killing Janine."

"Figured as much," she said under her breath.

"If you try to run away, I win and our audience will kill you. You can submit at any time during the fight, but that means I decide whether to let you live. I'll tell you now that

I'm not inclined to be merciful..."

That jibed with Jonas' lecture, all but the part about running away, which he hadn't thought relevant. She closed the distance between them while Toni was speaking.

"...happy now?"

"Yeah," she said, spinning on one foot.

Her leg sweep was effective. Toni crashed to the floor with a gasp of surprise, but she quickly rolled away, and pain flared in Chris' fist as it crunched into the concrete. She shook her throbbing hand, raised her guard again, and squared off with Toni. Her feet fell into old, barely remembered, patterns; knees slightly bent, legs apart, and weight evenly distributed, she circled just as Toni was now doing.

"Boxing?"

Chris nodded once. She had once trained regularly in the ring, but that was long ago during her academy days. Kickboxing had taken her fancy when one of the instructors gave a demonstration. She wished she had kept at it. It would have come in handy about now.

Toni edged forward.

Chris watched her eyes; there was nothing but a single-minded concentration in them. She let her feet find their own rhythm, a dance to music none but she could hear, and forced herself to look away. It was a rookie mistake to watch an opponent's eyes. Instead, she concentrated on Toni's centre of mass, looking for something, *anything*, to indicate an imminent attack. She found it almost too late. A tiny movement as one shoulder dipped, and she dropped to one knee as Toni's foot whistled through the air above her head. She came back up and landed two rapid punches over Toni's kidneys before dancing away.

Shouts of appreciation erupted from the crowd.

Jonas' voice was a basso bellow. "Don't get cocky! Take her down fast!"

*If only.*

Toni staggered away, clutching her side. Her face

hardened, and her eyes blazed with anger. She attacked with a lethal combination of kicks and punches. Chris ducked and dodged, blocking the blows when she could, backing away when she could not. The crowd shouted derisively as she circled the arena, trying to keep out of range.

“Stand and fight!” people shouted.

“Hit her!” others yelled.

*Yeah, right. Everyone's a critic.*

She ducked a punch, but it was a feint, and Toni followed up with her other fist. It exploded into Chris' jaw and she spat blood and teeth. Catcalls turned to whistles of admiration and groans of dismay. Toni had drawn first blood; the groans were from people who had lost their bets. Another fist slammed into her face and she staggered back. She swayed, blinking, but then her legs gave way and she sat down hard. The sounds of the crowd faded in and out, but the pain kept her from passing out. She shook her head, trying to make her eyes focus. Toni approached at a crawl, as if the air had thickened around her.

“... ange! Use the... like we pract... the...” Jonas was shouting, bellowing over the noise.

She shook her head again, trying to make sense of Jonas' voice droning in her ears. *Use what? Practiced?* She couldn't understand what he wanted.

Toni drew back a leg and kicked Chris as if she were a football.

She flew across the arena, and saw stars when her head cracked against the concrete. Every breath felt like torture; the kick had cracked a rib, maybe more than one.

*“Toni! Toni! Toni!”* the crowd chanted.

The chanting was so loud it resounded in her chest, and an explosion of pain followed each roar of her enemy's name. Lady, it hurt. She felt wetness in her hair, and blood trickled past her ear. She lay on her back at the edge of the arena, trying to breathe while pain pulsed through her chest in time with the chanting of the crowd.

“Get up!” Jonas roared. “Get up, you sniveling coward! Fight her!”

*Coward... who is that bastard calling a coward? I'll rip his arms off and feed them to him! I'll...*

**Get up, get up, get up!**

*All right, Furface. We're not done yet.*

**Let me fight her. I'll kill her!**

*If I let you out, she'll let her beast out. She's too strong for you. We'll try trickery first.*

**What are you going to do?**

She was lucky Smoke hadn't taken over the fight.

**Not yet.**

She rolled onto her stomach and pushed up onto hands and knees. Panting, with her head hanging, she concentrated on breathing through the pain in her chest, trying to appear oblivious of anything else. She could feel Toni approaching.

*Nearly here, nearly, now!*

She reared back, wrapping her arms around Toni's waist, and dragged her off her feet. They wrestled around, kicking and trying to get a good grip on each other. Toni slammed an arm into her chest to break free, and she gasped in pain. Toni was very handy with her elbows. Finally, Chris managed to control one of Toni's legs by clamping it between both of hers, and found leverage enough to struggle on top. She hammered a fist into Toni's face, and again, and again, in an effort to take some of the fight out of her.

Though battered and bleeding, Toni was as strong as ever. She reached up, trying to get a grip on Chris' neck, but she tucked her chin to prevent it. Toni planted a foot in her stomach, shoved her off, then leapt nimbly to her feet. Chris turned her backward sprawl into a roll, and landed back on her feet in time to take a kick to the stomach that doubled her over. When she straightened, she took another kick, this time to the head.

“You really...” Toni growled, and punched Chris in the mouth. “...shouldn't have killed...” a kick, this time to the

thigh. The leg collapsed. "...*my friend!*" she finished with a yell and another kick, this time to Chris' other leg.

She went to her knees, grimacing in pain. Both legs were numb and tingling. Leaning forward on one hand, she spat blood on the floor and checked her teeth. One had snapped close to the gum line. She hoped it would heal; she hated going to the dentist. She leaned back, sitting on her heels, and tried to summon the energy to rise.

Toni grabbed her head from behind. "Time to say good night," she growled, and twisted.

Chris tensed her neck muscles, resisting for all she was worth. Toni had an arm locked around her throat, making it hard to breathe. Chris sucked in a gulp of air and surged to her feet. She stomped on Toni's instep, and slammed an elbow back. Toni hissed at the pain, but didn't lose her grip. Chris reached desperately behind her, trying to gouge an eye, but Toni avoided her fingers. Dropping to her knees without warning, Chris threw her over her head.

Before she could rise, Toni returned and grabbed her arm. A twist, a chop, and the bone snapped. Chris screamed and tried to lash out with her other hand. Toni caught it easily. Stepping lightly away, Toni pulled the arm out straight, and without hesitation or emotion twisted and pulled with all her strength.

Chris' shoulder dislocated with a crunch.

Toni didn't follow up. Instead, she strutted slowly around the arena playing to the audience. "I will make the Alley Dogs strong again. Follow me, make me your alpha, and I will make our pack feared! As it should be..."

Chris remained kneeling where she was, hunched over and sobbing in pain. She concentrated and fur slithered over her broken arm. Hidden by the long sleeves of her sweatshirt, her arm changed. Claws curved like small scimitars—and just as sharp—sprang from her fingers. She forced herself not to scream when the Change snapped the arm straight and healed it.

**Yes! Now the other arm, quickly, while she's distracted with her boasting.**

Jonas had taught her the reason behind a shifter's miraculous healing. It turned out to be just another aspect of the Change. Just as when she changed form from human to wolf, injured cells exchanged themselves for healthy ones. It was a natural process, handled automatically, just like breathing. All shifters healed quickly. Alphas, though, had more control over the Change; they could heal themselves even faster—if they were willing to pay the price. It hurt and the Change always taxed a shifter's strength. Using it to heal her injuries meant she had to finish the fight quickly or risk exhaustion. If Toni was still standing when she ran out of steam...

*Best not think about that.*

She concentrated upon her shoulder. Bone grated and cartilage popped as the joint shifted back into place. The pain made tears stream from her eyes, but she didn't cry out, and her shoulder felt much better once the Change completed itself. It ached, the pain bone deep, but she could move the arm again.

**Now kill her!** Smoke roared, full of fury.

Chris climbed to her feet, clenching her changed fists and flexing her arms. Standing with her hands hidden behind her back, she waited for Tony to notice her.

**What are you doing? Kill her!**

*Wait. Watch and learn, Furface. Watch and learn.*

It was the crowd that tipped Toni off. They had stopped listening to her, and were watching Chris. Toni turned and frowned.

"Carry on," she said sarcastically. "I didn't want to interrupt your campaign speech." Behind her back, ten razor-sharp claws sprang out.

Toni snarled. She rushed at Chris, clenching her fist and cocking her arm as if intending to punch a hole right through Chris' head.

At the last instant, Chris took a single step and buried her

claws in Toni's belly and chest. "Surprise!" she snarled, her eyes blazing golden with Smoke's fury.

Toni's eyes bulged and she shrieked her agony. Kicking and screaming, she tried to free herself.

Chris ducked her head against flailing fists. "Let me show you how I killed Janine," she said, staring into those bulging eyes. Toni's heart fluttered like a panicking bird under her hand.

Toni shook her head, strength fading fast. Her lips were moving, but no sound came out.

"I can't hear you. Did you say something?"

The lips worked again, but Toni's eyes were dimming. She was going into shock. "Please..."

"Ah," she said, mimicking Toni's manner of speech. "She's begging for her life. I don't know why, but I'm feeling merciful."

**No, you fool! Smoke howled. Kill her! You must kill her! Never leave an enemy alive at your back!**

She carefully pulled her hands out of the broken woman's body and let her slump to the floor.

Toni moaned. Her head rolled from side to side, and she fumbled feebly at Chris' leg.

She stepped away from that touch and pushed Smoke's rage away, burying it deep so that she could think. Her eyes changed back, and Smoke's howls of protest seemed to retreat into the distance. The howls diminished but they did not stop. Smoke was furious with her.

She stared at Toni, feeling sick. The gaping wounds in her chest and belly were full of blood and overflowing onto the floor. Grey ropy-looking intestines bulged in the lower wound. She turned away, feeling light-headed, as if about to faint. Her legs were shaking so badly she didn't think she dared move, and she shivered uncontrollably. She wasn't sure if it was shock, or just weakness caused by the damage she had taken and her use of the Change.

Everyone was watching her. No one moved to help Toni.

“Well?” she snarled, turning in place as her anger rose. “What are you all looking at? Do something!”

They stared at her in silence while Toni writhed upon the floor, slowly dying. Most of the women regarded her with blank faces. It was an expression mostly reserved for strangers, neither friendly nor hostile. That was good enough; the lack of hostility was refreshing. Some of the onlookers looked thoughtful; others regarded her warily as if afraid she might attack one of them. She would have laughed, but knew she was more likely to cry, and didn’t have the strength left for either. She looked for anger at Toni’s demise in their faces, but found none. Although she *was* one, she would never understand shifters.

She turned and found Jonas. He was smiling. “Why won’t they help her?”

“The fight isn’t over.”

She looked back, but Toni hadn’t miraculously gotten to her feet. She sighed in relief, and turned back to scowl at Jonas. “Of course it’s over. Look at her.”

“She didn’t submit to you, and you didn’t declare yourself.”

She glared around. “For the Lady’s sake! Are you people nuts? She’s one of you. Help her!” There were a lot of shuffling feet, but no one entered the arena. “She’s finished. I’ve won.”

Jonas nodded. “Step out of the arena, and it’s over. They won’t enter until then.”

Chris walked shakily toward the chalked line, but the pain in her chest threatened to overcome her. She forced the blackness at the edges of her vision back, and willed herself not to scream when one of her broken ribs shifted painfully. Lord and Lady, she was a mess. Her mouth tasted foul and she stank of fear and blood. She wiped her mouth with the back of one hand, and grimaced when it came away bloody. Her chin must be covered in the stuff. She hated to think what she looked like to Lawrence. Nothing good, she was sure.

*Damn me, I hurt all over.*

**You should have let me fight her.**

*Humph! That's not what you said before.*

As she neared Jonas, tensions rose among the watching shifters. Pederson was getting excited. His heart was hammering, and his eyes gleamed where they stared hungrily at her. She could hardly feel Lawrence. He was right there next to Jonas, yet if she ignored her eyes and relied only upon her other senses, she would have sworn he had already left. His Presence was pulled in so tight, he was almost invisible. When she made to step over the line, Lawrence's face turned bleak.

She hesitated and asked warily, "If I cross the line, what happens?"

Pederson, careful not to cross the line himself, edged closer. "You become my mate, and alpha of the Alley Dog pack. It is your rightful place. Take it."

The crowd murmured in agreement. Maybe it was her imagination that made the agreement sound reluctant.

"I don't want to be your mate, or alpha of this pack. No offence, but I'm not ready to settle down."

There were a few chuckles at that.

"Enough of this foolishness," Pederson snarled. "By right of combat you are my mate."

"Not until she steps over the line, or Toni dies," Lawrence insisted.

Pederson growled irritably. "So we wait—another stupid waste of time."

She looked imploringly at Jonas, but he shrugged. "What if I cross the line, and then step down as their alpha?"

"You can't. Wolves mate for life."

"I'm not a wolf, not really."

Jonas nodded. "True, but your beast is. By pack law you will be mated to Pederson until he dies or you do."

There was no choice then. She turned, and went back to Toni. Incredibly, she was still conscious. Chris crouched and looked into Toni's frightened and pain-filled eyes.

"I don't want Pederson, but I'm guessing you do."

Correct?”

Toni managed the barest of nods.

“I want your word that if I give him to you, I walk free and clear. No swearing revenge on me for anything—nothing at all. No more bounties on my head either. I’m safe, right?”

Toni managed another nod.

“You bet your arse that’s right. If you or one of yours comes after me, I’m going to bring so much grief to your door you’ll wish your mamma never met your daddy. Are we clear on that?”

“I s-swear... you’re untouchable...” Toni managed to whisper.

**I hope you know what you’re doing.**

*So do I! One thing’s for sure, I’m not marrying Pederson.*

**Being mated is not the same as being married.**

*Whatever it is, I’m not doing it with Pederson.*

Smoke howled with laughter. **How about Lawrence?**

She growled irritably and stood up. “I submit to Toni. She won, I lost. I’m outa here.”

“No!” Pederson howled, but the roar of surprise coming from the rest of the audience drowned him out.

Weaving on her feet now, she left the arena. As soon as she did so, shifters surged forward to tend to Toni’s wounds. Chris slumped and would have fallen, but Lawrence was there.

“I’m always falling into your arms,” she said tiredly.

Lawrence grinned. “I know.” He swept an arm under her legs and lifted her like a child into his arms. “We have a plane to catch.”

She rested her head comfortably on Lawrence’s shoulder. She had one more fight to win before she could rest.

Chris awoke while the plane was still in the air. She listened to the aircraft noises, but it wasn’t the sound of the engines that had awoken her. It was the sound of fingers pounding a keyboard. Lephmann again. Didn’t that man know when to quit? She checked the time and realized they would be landing

soon. She sighed and swung her legs out of bed.

Her injuries had healed without a trace while she slept. Her shoulder and arm felt fine, and she was breathing without pain again. The broken tooth still hurt dully. It would probably feel a lot worse if she hadn't been used to the Change now. It felt the same as before to her probing fingers, and she resigned herself to a trip to the dentist... if she could find one that accepted shifters.

Lephmann's plane came with all the modern conveniences. After opening a couple of doors at random, she found the shower. She used it, luxuriating under the hot spray, but she didn't linger. When she was finished, she found some clothes laid out on the bed. She frowned at them and then at the door. She didn't like it that someone had entered without her knowing about it. She shrugged away her annoyance and got dressed.

Lephmann was very thorough; everything fit perfectly. The bra and panties were the same style as those in the drawer back home, but these hadn't come from there. He had gotten her sizes and preferences exactly right, but these were way more expensive than she had ever bought. Silk and lace? Not something a cop would be caught dead wearing.

**Maybe it's time to get new clothes.**

She frowned. She wasn't stupid enough to think Smoke was really talking about clothes. She was hinting at other things. Mark, her career, her colleagues at work... all were gone. What was holding her in the city now? An empty house and memories of what had been but no longer was? Mum and Dad had said she could move back in with them, but the thought of living on the farm made her shudder. When she was a kid, she had eagerly looked forward to leaving home for college, and had only been back for short visits since. The city had always called her back after a few days. She'd go mad if she had to help her Dad with the farm for longer than a week. Just thinking about all that emptiness and the stink of horses made her yearn for the familiar streets of Monster Central.

**You're not a cop any more. Maybe it's time to try new things.**

"Going to live with my parents isn't something new. It's a backward step. Whose side are you on anyway?"

**Yours. What will we do after Ryder?**

Life after Ryder was something she preferred not to think about.

She pulled on the blouse and buttoned buttons. The jacket and pants were dark grey and very elegant. They would have cost her more than a month's salary—if she'd still had one. She had been using and discarding clothes at a ferocious rate since the attack. Luckily, jeans and sweatshirts were cheap, and she had managed to save the expensive duster Stephen had given her, so she still had a nice coat. It was hanging in the closet. Her sneakers were in there too, but they were very shabby. There were bloodstains that no amount of washing had been able to remove. They were fit only for the garbage can. Lephmann obviously agreed, because he had supplied a pair of shoes that matched the outfit she was wearing; nice-looking ones too.

She frowned at them. What kind of man knew anything about women's shoes; knew they should match the outfit, should look good without being flashy, and shouldn't have too high a heel in case she needed to run? What kind of man thought so much about her needs, and knew so much—too much—about her state of mind? Was she really that easy to read? She shrugged and put the shoes on. She fluffed her still-drying hair a little, and ran a hand over the pants. They were form fitting and felt very good on her skin. She hadn't worn something this nice in months. Wearing it now made her feel better.

**After Ryder?** Smoke reminded.

"I was thinking."

**No you weren't.**

She sighed. There was no hiding anything from Smoke. "I guess we look for a job, and start over."

**And what about Lawrence? What of a pack?**

"If the Alley Dogs are anything to go by, I think we're better off on our own. As for Lawrence, I have no idea what he feels for me, or what I feel for him. He's nice, but... I don't know, Smoke. I'm not looking for a man."

**Maybe you should start.**

"Maybe."

She left the bedroom and found herself in a narrow and carpeted corridor. She turned right and followed the sound of Lephmann's typing into the main cabin. Lawrence was sitting on a comfortable couch reading a book. He looked up and smiled when she entered.

"You look better," he said. He put the book face down on the seat beside him to hold it open, and stood. "Did you sleep well?"

"Fine, thanks."

Lawrence reached out and tipped her chin up a little. "Does the tooth hurt?"

His touch sent tingles through her body, and Smoke shifted restlessly beneath her skin. Lawrence's thumb stroked her cheek, and Smoke surged up, but this wasn't the Change. It was something else. Chris tried to tell herself she didn't like being touched... only she did. It felt so good. She gasped when Lawrence's Presence roared out of him and into her chest. Their beasts met in an orgy of heat that slowly spread through her body. In her mind, a pair of wolves fought, biting each other playfully. Farris' Presence rolled through her body leaving her panting. Slowly, the feeling ebbed, and she realized Lawrence had lowered his hand.

**Farris likes me.** Smoke said, sounding smug. **He thinks you and Lawrence should mate right away.**

*What just happened?*

**Farris came to visit me.**

*He can do that?*

**You felt his Presence within you. What do you think?**

She still had a lazy smile on her face when she realized

Lawrence was waiting for her to say something. "I... what?"

"The tooth?" Lawrence said with a knowing smile.

"Oh yeah... the tooth. It hurts? Yeah it sort of hurts a little. It didn't heal like the rest, but... What did you do to me?"

"Didn't you like it?"

"Oh yeah," she said, and couldn't help the shiver that ran through her.

Lawrence grinned. "Maybe I'll show you how to do it one day. The tooth will be fine after your next change back from wolf form. Hungry?"

"Starving!"

Lawrence chuckled. "I'll get you something. Make yourself comfortable. I won't be long."

Chris sat and checked out the back cover of Lawrence's book. It was a romance novel about a homicide cop who falls in love with one of her suspects. She shook her head and put the book back the way she found it. She wouldn't have pegged Lawrence as the romantic type. More like an action-hero fan.

**It's fate.**

*Don't start that!*

**Start what?**

*You know.*

She looked up to find Lephmann watching her. He had his portable computer before him, but she hadn't heard him typing for a while now. She fidgeted under his gaze, knowing he had just witnessed something she would rather keep private. She needed to figure out what she felt for Lawrence before showing it to the world.

"Thanks for the clothes," she said to cover her embarrassment.

A smile flickered and was gone on his face. "Lawrence is a better judge of women's clothing than I will ever be."

**And of women, too?**

*Oh, do shut up.*

"I should thank him, then."

Lepmann did something with his computer. He put it aside and stood to make himself a drink at the bar. "Want something?"

"A beer would be good."

Lepmann nodded and ducked briefly behind the bar. He came back up holding a bottle. "Will Empire do?"

Empire was the best. The Brits were good for more than governing Europe. "Empire is fine, thanks."

Lepmann poured himself Glenlivet over ice, the scent very distinctive, and then returned.

She took the beer, popped the lid off with a thumb, and caught it midair. Lepmann raised an eyebrow at the display. He sat opposite her and crossed his legs to enjoy his drink. They sat in a companionable silence for a short time, drinking.

"Lawrence told me about your day."

"A hard day."

Lepmann nodded. "What do you think of Jonas?"

"A man of many parts," she said, straight-faced. "He looks very cute in pink, but very scary in fur. A good man to have on your side—he would make a very bad enemy. He pushed me further than I thought I could go and taught me a lot of things about myself. Some of it saved my life."

"I'm glad he did it, then. He likes you a lot."

"You've spoken to him?"

Lepmann nodded again. "He called while you were sleeping, wanting to know how you were. I told him you were fine. You are, aren't you? You didn't have to kill anyone, and you managed to come away free of any entanglements."

"Yeah, I'm okay. I have Toni's word she won't let anyone come after me. So I'm good. When you see Jonas again, you can tell him he doesn't have to worry about me. I've learned my lessons."

Lepmann stared hard into her eyes. "Have you, have you really?"

She nodded. "I know what it is to be a shifter now. I have

to start living in their world. It's my world too, now."

"Thank all that's holy for that. I never thought I would hear you say those words, Chris. Jonas isn't the only one who will be relieved to hear that you understand that."

"Oh?"

"Stephen was worried for you. I was too."

Lawrence came back with a tray of food, and Chris used the opportunity to look away from Lephmann. He was making her uncomfortable with his talk of worrying about her.

She took the tray and tucked into the food. There were no pancakes this time. Lawrence had kept things simple with a big plate of burgers and a huge heap of fries. There was enough for three, but Lephmann said he'd already eaten. Chris ate most of it, with Lawrence helping out toward the end.

"Better?" Lawrence asked when she finished.

"I'm stuffed."

"You needed it. The fight took it out of you."

"Good thing Jonas fed me up before we left for George."

Lawrence nodded. "Jonas knew what he was doing. You don't want to get in a fight when you're hungry, Chris. Bad things can happen."

She had a flashback of the fight with Janine in the desert. The thought of what had nearly happened there threatened to sour her stomach. She forced the image of eating a human heart out of her head by concentrating on the here and now.

"So," she said. "Sanctuary."

"Won't be long now," Lephmann said, checking the time. "Maybe twenty minutes."

"Tell me about it."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

Lephmann grinned. "Everything?"

"Sure. I don't know anything about it, so I don't know what questions to ask."

Lephmann leaned back and interlocked his fingers in his lap. "Very well, let's see. Have you ever heard of Roosevelt's

Folly?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"I don't know what they're teaching people in the schools these days," Lephmann grumbled irritably, and began his lecture.

According to him, Congress had made repeated attempts to create a national park out of the Teton mountain range and its lakes in the late 1920s, but the elves blocked it. Congress had wanted to create a national park that would have swallowed up over 350,000 acres of forestland the elves held as sacred. After his success at declaring the Jackson Hole National Monument in '43, President Roosevelt tried again, but the elves wouldn't budge. Their refusal effectively killed the Teton National Park idea, and the entire area—now known as Grand Teton—became a no-go zone for humans.

"How big is it?" she asked.

"Including the town, Sanctuary spans well over a million acres. Most of it is densely forested, perfect for hunting in beast form—we are very careful to preserve game stocks. There are twelve peaks in the Teton Range; they're ours as well. We have all six of the glacial lakes at the base of the mountains, and we also managed to lay claim to Jackson Lake including the old monument site."

She whistled. "And you own all that?"

"Me personally?"

"Yeah."

"Not hardly!" Lephmann laughed, and Lawrence grinned. "I might be president of the Society, but it doesn't mean I own it or Techtron. I *work* for them; I don't *own* them. No man does. I set it up that way on purpose. No one lives forever, Chris. I want the Society and Sanctuary to endure, not fade away when I'm gone."

"Makes sense."

"It's perfect for shifters, Chris," Lawrence said enthusiastically. "You'll see."

Lephmann nodded.

She supposed she would see. “How did you acquire the land if the elves were so hot to keep it for themselves?”

“Ah, now that’s a story in itself, but basically, Queen Caoilfhionn approached me about a partnership when I became President of Techtron and started NSPCL.”

Caoilfhionn was a name that very few people had not heard. She was Queen of the Unseelie elves, and had been for something like six hundred years. An inconceivably long time to Chris, but not to the elves, who were supposedly immortal. No one really knew for sure. Elves didn’t like talking about it.

She grinned. “I bet she read the contracts with a microscope.”

Lepmann sighed. “You have no idea how right you are. Legally, Techtron jointly owns Sanctuary in partnership with the Queen as representative for her court. Neither party can dispose of any part of the land without the other’s agreement—not ever. Caoilfhionn is a very shrewd woman. By simply signing a contract, she effectively buffered her people’s land from interference in both real and legal terms. Her people’s ancestral lands are now part of Sanctuary, an area that human property law enforces. She thought that signing with a corporation like Techtron would make it harder for the government to play games with its treaties and agreements. I agreed with her, but more importantly, Myles did too. Techtron would tie the government in legal knots forever should it try anything here, and they know that.”

“And where does NSPCL come in?”

“The Society protects and maintains Sanctuary. The elves are silent partners—very silent. I haven’t heard a word from them regarding Sanctuary since we moved in, but they’re watching. I’m sure they’ll make their displeasure known should we do something to upset them.”

Chris had more questions, but just then the flight attendant joined them. He was pure human and quite short, wearing dark trousers and a dark waistcoat over a white shirt. They had met only briefly just before takeoff.

"We'll be landing shortly, Mr. Lephmann," the flight attendant said.

"Thank you, Sam. Tell Charlie the flight was excellent as ever."

"I'll tell her, Sir."

Lephmann closed down his computer and secured it on the seat beside him. Chris had asked him what he was working on at the beginning of the flight, but his attempt to enlighten her regarding the costs involved in the manufacture of AI computer components in zero gee had made her eyes glaze over.

She checked her seatbelt and then turned to watch out the window as they came in to land. The airport consisted of two runways with their attendant taxiways, a small air-traffic control centre with its standard but obsolete tower, a tiny comp that was little more than a waiting room for use in bad weather, and a cluster of warehouses and hangars with a huge Techtron logo painted on their roofs.

The pilot swung onto her final approach heading, slowed the plane to a crawl, and realigned her engines so that they hovered briefly before descending gently to the ground. Chris had to give the pilot her due; she was smooth. The bump as they came to rest was less than an elevator would have given them.

She unbuckled her seat belt and rose to her feet. David preceded her off the plane, and Lawrence came last.

"So this is Sanctuary," she said, looking around.

Lephmann smiled. "No, this is an airport. The elves didn't want it on their lands, but we wouldn't have built it any closer for a number of reasons; security for one, privacy for another. The real Sanctuary is quite a few miles from here via road. Our people run the airport. They keep nosy outsiders away."

Made sense. Shifters looking for a place to call their own, a place where they could be themselves without fear, wouldn't want nosy humans wandering by. She closed her eyes and turned her face toward the sun. She didn't realize that

Lephmann had similar ideas until Lawrence chuckled. She opened her eyes to find him looking blindly into the sun.

"Listen to that silence," Lephmann said, his eyes still closed.

"It's great to be back," Lawrence agreed and winked at Chris. "You want us to give you some privacy, David?"

Lephmann's lips twitched. "Smart arse."

She rolled her eyes in amusement. A familiar face was waiting for them by a dark green and expensive-looking, 4x4 SUV. Ronnie smiled and nodded to her when she approached, slapped Lawrence on the shoulder in welcome, and gave Lephmann a warm hug. Chris watched this, wondering if they were a couple. She couldn't think of a tactful way to ask.

"Welcome back," Ronnie said. "Geoffrey would have picked you up, but I thought I had better do it."

"Good idea," Lephmann said.

"Why?" Chris asked.

Ronnie shrugged. "You know, a woman alone with three men."

"Oh *puh-lease...*" she said, rolling her eyes. "Give me a break."

Lawrence chuckled and climbed behind the wheel. Ronnie joined him up front, leaving Chris and David together in the back.

\* \* \*

## Sanctuary

By the time Chris finally arrived in town, her legs were stiff. The drive had been a tiring one and the day was well along. Lawrence found a space outside the guesthouse where they planned to stay, and pulled over. Chris climbed out and walked the stiffness from her muscles, taking the opportunity to study the town she would be calling home for the next few weeks.

Apart from its tiny size, Sanctuary—she had no other name to call the town—looked no different to hundreds of other small towns. That surprised her somehow, though she didn't know why it should. Large or small, a house was a house, a bar was a bar. Shifters lived in cities and towns all over the Republic, and apart from certain telltale characteristics like their eyes and sometimes their teeth, they looked just like humans most of the time. So why should a town built *by* shifters *for* shifters be any different to one built by humans? No reason. No reason at all that she could see, but she still felt... well, almost let down by how ordinary Sanctuary seemed. If not for the towering peaks and tree-covered slopes visible over the roofs, she could have believed herself in any of a thousand small towns scattered throughout the Republic.

Sanctuary consisted of one major street, Main Street, which was simply a continuation of the road that had brought them here, and maybe a dozen cross streets. According to Lephmann, the town had a permanent population of less than two thousand, but a transient population that rose and fell with the seasons. The town was simply a place to supply visiting packs with a few basic necessities, and was somewhere to leave their belongings while they roamed the forests on four feet. Main Street had stores, guesthouses, a few restaurants, and a fast food place. The homes built along the side roads were spacious and widely separated from one another. They had huge front yards, and she assumed they had big gardens out back. Seeing so much openness reminded her of Geoffrey's explanation regarding shifter etiquette; they needed privacy. They certainly had that here. The streets were wide, the homes large, the gardens huge, and then there was that inviting view that almost begged to be explored.

A large stone-clad building dominated the end of Main Street. She thought it might once have been a school. She wondered what it was used for now; not for teaching, because she had never seen or heard of a shifter child.

Lawrence joined her. "What are you doing?"

She pointed out the building. "A school?"

"Oh, sure, there aren't many kids there, but there are some." Lawrence noted the look of outrage on her face. "What's the problem, don't you like kids?"

"I like them just fine, but shifters can't have kids... can they?"

"Of course they can! You didn't think we kidnapped and infected them, did you?"

She shook her head, blushing. "Course not."

"You *did!*" Lawrence crowed. He burst out laughing, and had to struggle to stop. "I'm sorry, Chris, but your face..."

She growled, crossed her arms, and waited for an explanation.

"Sorry. Shifters can have children, but it's a bit complicated.

Carrying to term is really hard for our females because of the Change, but it can be done.”

“How do the kids handle it?”

“The Change you mean?”

She nodded.

“Thank the Lady they don’t have to deal with it. The beast won’t awake in them until puberty. The parents have to watch carefully for the first signs of it, and schedule the ritual on the first night of the next full moon.”

“That must be a bit of a worry.”

“A bit,” Lawrence agreed. “Hey, I forgot. Ronnie wanted me to come get you.”

“She did?”

“Yes. We have rooms here at Millie’s place. Ronnie wanted to introduce the two of you.”

Chris nodded and followed Lawrence into the guesthouse.

They found Ronnie with Lephmann chatting to a silver-haired woman. Chris guessed this was the friend Ronnie wished to introduce. The woman was a shifter and about sixty years old. She was wearing a colorful flower-patterned blouse tucked into a dark knee-length skirt, and was quite short. Ronnie was taller, and she was a short woman.

Chris reached out with her senses as Jonas had taught her, to sample the woman’s Presence, and found it surprisingly weak. Ronnie and Lephmann were acting very deferential, which was all wrong. Shifters did not defer to those weaker than they were. She slowed her approach; she didn’t like situations she didn’t understand.

Ronnie leaned forward and whispered something to her friend.

The woman turned toward Chris with a smile that faltered when their eyes met.

Chris frowned, unable to think of a reason for it.

“Millie Ryason, this is Chris Humber,” Ronnie said, oblivious to her friend’s sudden tension.

Chris closed the distance. "Nice to meet you, Millie."

"Is it?" Millie asked. "You don't remember me, do you? Perhaps that's best."

She frowned. Millie *was* vaguely familiar, but she couldn't say where or when they had met. Why was it for the best that she not remember?

Millie turned and hurried behind the reservations desk to collect some keys. She tossed two to Lawrence. "Show Chris to her room, would you, Lawrence? I've put you two next to each other. Don't forget, kids, dinner is at seven sharp."

Lawrence nodded. He checked the numbers on the key tags and led the way.

As they walked, she tried to remember where she was supposed to know Millie from. It couldn't have been recently or she would remember. Where had they met?

"Farris loves Sanctuary, Chris. He can hardly wait to show Smoke his favorite places. He says you'll both like it here."

The thought of so much emptiness reminded her of living on the farm and made her uneasy, but she was certain Smoke would enjoy it. Lawrence took a shortcut through the dining room, and then followed a carpeted hall toward their wing of the guesthouse. She hardly noticed her surroundings, so intent was she on dredging her memory for Millie's face. Her steps faltered and her eyes flew wide as she remembered how she knew the woman. They had met a couple of months before she made detective. Eight years ago...

She and her partner had been patrolling Monster Central's streets in their black and white when they received a call about a disturbance. Information was sketchy, but there appeared to be a robbery in progress at a restaurant owned by a Mr. Ryason. Ryason was a human that had chosen to risk living among monsters in order to make a living. He and his wife, Millie Ryason, lived above their little restaurant on Trinity Street, and served their community with cheap drinks and meals.

When Chris reached the scene, she found the bodies of

three men. All of them had died hard; something with sharp teeth had torn their throats out. She recognized two of them as AML sympathizers. They had caused trouble for her before.

Her partner shouted a warning, and she snatched her gun free of the holster at her hip. She ran to join him as he headed for an adjoining street. There they found a shifter in wolf form mauling a man on the sidewalk. The wolf was Millie Ryason, but Chris hadn't known that then. No one had known Ryason's wife was a shifter, or rather, the authorities hadn't known. The shifter community had of course, but they knew how to keep secrets better than anyone.

"Let him go or I'll shoot!" she ordered.

Her partner fired without giving a warning, and the wolf howled in pain. It turned to rush them.

Chris opened fire, and must have put three out of five slugs into the wolf before it retreated. When they reached the guy on the ground, he had already bled out his life, but that wasn't the end of the story.

Millie Ryason remained at large, spending her nights attacking AML supporters, killing them when she could, infecting them when she could not. She knew their friends would do her work for her by killing those she infected. The newsies screamed about a serial killer loose in the city, and task forces were set up to hunt Millie down, but before they could find her, the killings stopped.

Millie Ryason had vanished without a trace.

Chris turned back, and found Millie in the entrance to the dining room watching her. Chris hesitated. It had been a different time; a time when she wore a black uniform and did what she was told to do in the name of justice, even if that meant shooting unarmed shifters. Those days were gone. The woman who had done those things was gone long before she lost her humanity to Ryder in a dirty alley.

Millie nodded and smiled.

Chris nodded back, and hurried to catch up with Lawrence.

She joined him outside her door. He had opened it for her, but had not entered. She stepped inside, and saw the note on the bed. She snatched it up before Lawrence noticed, and read it quickly.

*I have what you need.  
Meet me behind the school at ten.*

G.

She crumpled Geoffrey's note and stuffed it in her pocket.

Lawrence dropped the key to her room on the nightstand. "Is there anything you need?"

She took off her coat and jacket, and threw them on a chair, before crossing the room to the door. She locked it, and faced him undoing the buttons of her blouse.

Lawrence watched intently. "Are you sure? What about Smoke?"

She chuckled. "Smoke has been pushing me to do this since we first met you."

Lawrence grinned and took her in his arms. "She is a very discerning wolf. What about you, what do you want?"

She took possession of his lips with hers for a long kiss. "That will do for starters." She smiled mischievously. She pushed him so that he fell back onto the bed, and then joined him for another kiss. "And now for the main course..."

Chris followed the path running along the outside of the school's boundary fence, and met Geoffrey at what she felt like calling the edge of civilization. Now that she knew of its dual purpose of providing fugitives a safe haven, while offering shifters somewhere to roam in safety, she wasn't sure the appellation really applied to Sanctuary.

Geoffrey stepped out of the trees carrying a black nylon bag. His eyes shone like flashlights in the darkness. "Ryder

crossed the border an hour ago.”

*Border?*

Sanctuary wasn't a country; non-humans might populate it, but it was still part of the Republic. Lephmann, and now Geoffrey it seemed, acted as if that wasn't so.

**Would you prefer otherwise? Where else could we kill Ryder and not be arrested for it?**

She frowned. *You're right. This way is better.*

“I have what you asked for, Chris. I couldn't get much ammo—you didn't give me enough time—but there should be enough to get the job done.”

“How many is not much?”

“Sixty rounds.”

“*Sixty!*” she gasped. “Damn it, Geoffrey, sixty is nothing. I'll burn through that in seconds!”

“Best I could do. I loaded the magazines so that every third round is silver. I had to have them custom made, Chris, you're lucky to get that many.”

She nodded unhappily. It would have to do.

“Are you sure you don't need me with you?” Geoffrey said, looking concerned.

“I'm sure.”

He nodded and pulled a hand-drawn map out of his pocket. He crouched, and spread it out on the ground. Chris willed her eyes to change, and the night brightened. She joined Geoffrey in a crouch and studied the map.

“We're here,” he said, tapping the bottom edge of the map with a finger. “You need to follow the grade up to here.”

“Got it.” There was an X marking her destination. “What are these lines?”

“Game trails. Smoke will find them useful. Marty and his mate are using one of the cabins. There are quite a few of them up here.”

“I thought the elves didn't like you changing stuff.”

Geoffrey shrugged. “A lot of them were already here, but we added more. As long as we build by hand and don't bring in

machines and high tech, they don't seem to mind. The cabins are community property. We use them to store stuff while in beast form, or for shelter if the weather turns. You might meet other shifters on your way up. Be polite. Let Smoke handle everything and you'll be fine."

"I can be polite," she said, feeling affronted. "When haven't I been polite?"

Geoffrey shook his head. "Our beasts instinctively know when to lead and when to defer to another. Let Smoke have her way, and you'll get where you need to be a lot quicker."

She grunted noncommittally. "What are the cabins like?"

"Small. One room usually, rarely two, with a cellar and a loft. All log construction, no electricity—the town is the only place with power here. David had to talk fast to get the Queen to agree even to that. There's a wooden-decked porch all round them, and only one door. The windows have shutters."

"Sounds perfect."

Geoffrey nodded. "When you get there, be careful of Rebecca."

"Yeah?"

"You'll be an unknown female encroaching on her territory. Keep your distance and explain why you're there first thing. You don't want her thinking you're after her mate."

She sighed. "I'll tell her Ryder is on his way."

"That should do it. What do you plan to do with them when Ryder turns up?"

She shrugged. "Keep them in the cabin I guess."

"Can I make a suggestion?"

"Go ahead."

"Put them in the loft. That should keep them out of your hair."

"Why not the cellar?"

"Would you want to be trapped underground with Ryder looking for you?"

"Good point."

*Ready?*

**I am always ready.**

*I meant, do you understand the map?*

**I have told you many times that I know what you know.**

*I should have remembered.*

Geoffrey rolled up the map and stood. Chris undressed and gave her clothes to him. He folded them neatly and put them in the bag for later. Standing naked before him, she took several deep breaths and nodded.

"Let's do it."

**I come!**

The muscle-ripping pain seared through her accompanied by an explosion of heat. She felt as if she was flying apart; her scream sounded distant as the Change took her. Smoke was elated at being allowed out, and Chris felt a little ashamed that she had begrudged Smoke her freedom. Her consciousness wavered, and Smoke surged forward to replace her.

Smoke scrambled to her feet and shook herself vigorously. It felt so good to breathe the air and feel the sod beneath her paws again. She wanted to run, she wanted to roll in the dirt, but there was something she had to do first. Ryder was coming, and they were destined to meet one last time.

"Good luck," Geoffrey said. Smoke butted him playfully in the stomach. He grabbed the fur of her ruff and bent to look her directly in the eyes. "Be. Careful."

Smoke felt like laughing; he was so serious. If he would but listen, Zelus would tell him that death was like the Change. It was just a passage to another form of existence. Chris had begun to see the truth of that. It had taken her a long time to acknowledge it, but then, she could be overly serious herself sometimes.

Geoffrey released her with a final pat. Smoke grabbed the bag with her jaws and dashed into the trees.

Smoke ghosted through the woods, silent as her namesake. The moon and stars lit her way as she ran. She had a long way

to travel tonight, but she was surefooted and strong, and did not doubt she would reach the right place before dawn. The breeze of her passage through the trees brought her the spoor of another wolf—an old male past his prime. The spoor was days old, but she turned to follow it without slowing, knowing it would lead her to a game trail.

The miles flowed beneath her paws as the night progressed. She followed the game trail for as long as it went her way then abandoned it for rougher terrain when it veered back toward lower climes. Her pace slowed as she scrambled over rocky outcrops, and slowed again when she forced her way through the sometimes-dense undergrowth. She ran all the harder to make up the time when she finally left the obstacles behind. An owl hooted; its hunting disturbed by Smoke's rapid passage through her domain.

Prey fled before her, as prey will when startled. A rabbit, a badger, another rabbit; lucky for them she was not hungry. Had she an empty belly, they would not have heard her before she pounced and made a meal of them.

The sounds of panting breath and pounding paws on earth became her companions. She met no other wolves. Though she sensed watching eyes in the darkness, she did not see them. She broke out of the trees into a clearing. The Moon's meager glow illuminated shadowy shapes standing motionless. A small herd of elk. They sensed danger, and heads turned toward her, but before their unease spread and caused them to flee, she had crossed the open space and submerged herself once more in the woods. That was the way of it for many hours. Loping through the trees was as natural to her as breathing. It took no thought, only action. Her body performed what was needful instinctively.

Finally, she sensed the dawn approaching and slowed. She walked slowly along a well-used trail, knowing that she neared her destination. She stopped and sniffed the air. Wolves—perhaps the very ones Chris sought to safeguard from Ryder—had used the trail recently. She moved on,

walking another mile, and found the cabin in the centre of a small clearing. It looked exactly as Geoffrey described it, and it was in the right place. The clearing was upslope of a lake, and the trees had been cleared far enough back to allow those within the cabin a clear view of it. She wondered if it the lake had a name. Probably it did; men liked naming things.

She circled the clearing, keeping to the woods as she scouted the area. There was no sign of Ryder, nor sign of any other shifter. The only scents fresh enough to matter belonged to male and female wolves. Their scents lay thick over the entire area, and she assumed they were the ones Chris wanted to talk with.

Smoke dropped the bag she had carried for so many hours and licked her lips. She was thirsty, and her mouth tasted foul. She had noticed before that manthings like Geoffrey's bag often smelled and tasted awful. She wondered why that was so, and wondered if men knew or cared.

She sat on her haunches, watching the sunrise over the distant hills, and wished she did not have to leave yet. Running through the woods, and breathing the air as her kind was meant to do, felt so good. She wanted to run through the woods and never stop, but Chris would never forgive her if Ryder escaped. She huffed, a deep and sad sigh. She watched the night flee, mourning the coming loss of freedom, and started the Change.

\* \* \*

## End Game

Chris awoke lying on her side in the woods. She had dreamed about Smoke running through the night, tireless and otherworldly. She wished she could see the herd of elk again; they had been a wonderful surprise. She pushed herself up, groaning as her joints popped, and looked around. There was a clearing just ahead and a cabin, just like in her dream. It had been no dream. Smoke had found Marty and Rebecca... maybe.

She dragged Geoffrey's bag closer and dressed quickly, keeping constant watch on the silent cabin. It was past dawn; Marty and his girlfriend might wake and decide to leave. She needed them under wraps where she could keep an eye on them, not wandering the woods. Once dressed, she assembled her FP90 assault rifle. She had specifically asked Geoffrey to get it for her; she had carried one on riot duty her third year in uniform. She remembered how the FP90's ejection port caused it to pull slightly to the right when fired full auto, but most of all, she remembered the kind of damage a 7.62mm round could do. The thought of shooting Ryder with it made her feel positively cheerful.

She finished the assembly, unfolded the stock, and

sighted on the cabin briefly before delving into her bag for ammunition. Geoffrey had supplied three sixty round magazines. She loaded the rifle, and pushed the spares into the waistband of her pants where she could reach them quickly. Leaving the rest of her stuff in the bag for now, she climbed to her feet and approached the cabin.

"Stop there!" a man—Marty Preston, she hoped—shouted from within the cabin before she reached the porch steps.

She resisted the urge to raise her rifle. She left it hanging from her shoulder by its strap. "Marty Preston?" Silence greeted her. "My name's Chris Humber. Jay sent me with a message."

The door opened and a man matching Marty's picture stepped onto the porch carrying a machete. She didn't like that. Getting shot was one thing—she could probably heal a bullet wound now that Jonas had shown her how—but if Marty hit her with that thing, she could lose important parts of her anatomy. She stepped out of his reach as he descended the porch steps.

Marty studied her carefully. "I don't know you. Who sent you, what pack?"

"I told you. Jay sent me."

"He wouldn't do that. He'd come himself."

"He couldn't. He sent me to say he was sorry."

Over Marty's shoulder, Chris saw a woman appear in the doorway. The woman—Rebecca Cairns, it had to be—came to the edge of the porch.

"Sorry for what?" Rebecca asked.

Marty frowned disapprovingly at his girlfriend, but echoed the question. "Sorry for what?"

Chris looked around at the woods. They were vulnerable standing out in the open. "Look, it's a long story. Can we go inside and talk?"

"If you give me the rifle we can."

She handed it over.

Marty seemed surprised at her easy acceptance of his

demand, but then waved her toward the door. "Inside... we have coffee if you want it."

She nodded, and entered the dimly lit cabin.

The one-room cabin was exactly as Geoffrey described it. It had one door, and a couple of windows still shuttered from the night before. Opposite the door were stairs leading to the loft where she assumed Marty and Rebecca had been spending their nights. There was an iron stove in one corner of the room radiating heat and the smell of the promised coffee. In the centre was a roughly made wooden table with benches on each side. The lamp on the table was unlit; the only light came through the open door.

Chris changed her eyes, and the room brightened as colors bled away.

"Sit," Marty ordered, not quite pointing the rifle at her. "Becky, get the coffee."

Rebecca grumbled but moved obediently toward the stove.

Marty sat opposite Chris with the rifle on the table between them. She carefully moved the barrel aside with one finger so that it no longer pointed directly at her. Marty let her do it, but kept his finger near the trigger.

"So talk," Marty said.

"I know about Ryder."

"So you know. So what?"

She shrugged. "So I know he's after you. Look, I've had trouble with Ryder myself. You might say he made me the woman I am today. I went after him to settle things, and found him torturing Jay for information."

Rebecca returned with three coffees and sat next to Marty. "How is he?"

"Dead."

Rebecca's eyes darkened.

Marty was more practical. "Jay wouldn't talk."

"He talked. He didn't have a choice after Ryder got done with him. Jay could barely speak when I found him. He told

me to tell you he was sorry.”

“Goddess comfort him,” Rebecca murmured with tears in her eyes. “What are we going to do?”

“Leave here, and go someplace else,” Marty said, pushing to his feet.

Chris slapped a hand on the rifle. “No! Ryder is already here. When I left town he was an hour behind me. You can’t run forever.”

“The hell we can’t!”

“He’ll hunt you both down.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

She hissed in frustration. “I have some stuff with me to even the odds. Let me handle Ryder. If I fail, at least I’ll have softened him up for you.”

Marty shook his head. “I dunno...”

“Let her,” Rebecca pleaded, “let her, Marty. I can’t live like this. I’m so scared all the time I can hardly think anymore. Trust the Goddess to save us, Marty. Let Ryder come.”

“Nice sentiments,” Chris said scornfully, “but I’ll trust my rifle, thanks.”

“You’re not a believer?”

“I believe in the Lord and Lady, but if good people refuse to fight evil, it will lead them into the hells regardless.”

Marty sighed and shook his head as if he couldn’t believe he was considering staying. “Ryder isn’t evil, he’s insane.”

“Aren’t we all?” Chris muttered.

“I don’t mean shifter craziness, that’s just our nature. I mean really insane. He has bats in his belfry.”

She remembered Ryder’s insane laughter the night of her attack and shivered. “Whatever. When he gets here, I’m going to put him out of my misery.”

“And if you don’t?”

She shrugged. “If he kills me, I won’t make it easy for him. I’ll leave him easy meat for you, I promise.”

Marty looked sideways at Rebecca and she nodded. He sighed and pushed the rifle at Chris. “Okay. Where do you

want me?"

She took her rifle back and flicked the safety back on. "I want you and your machete upstairs protecting Rebecca."

"Good, 'coz you'll have to shoot us to get us in the cellar."

She nodded and rummaged in her bag. "I have four of these for the roof. I want them positioned so that Ryder can't make a move without me seeing him."

Marty picked up one of the remotes. "I'll take care of it. What will you be doing?"

She held up a couple of spheres about the size of a silver dollar. "I'm going to spread some of these around the woods. I won't be long."

When Chris returned to the cabin, she found Marty sitting on the bottom stair waiting for her. There was no sign of Rebecca. Chris retrieved the last remaining piece of kit in her bag—a Techtron NX12000s audiovisual headset. She activated it, and put it on. It had been a while since she had worn any kind of headset, and military gear was very different to her old crime scene kit. Her old headset recorded audiovisual impressions of what she saw around her, but this one displayed what the remotes on the roof saw. It could also give warning if the perimeter sensors she had seeded around the grounds detected a breach. The headset's display covered her left eye, while her right viewed the cabin unhindered. Soldiers were trained to deal with the data input, but she found it disorientating. To help with that, she sat on the table facing the open door with her rifle, and closed her right eye.

"How long have you been a shifter?" Marty said, watching the door.

She kept her attention focused on what she received from the remotes, and didn't turn to look at him. "Six weeks, I think."

"You don't feel that new. You're strong."

"So I've been told."

"No pack?"

"Not yet, maybe never."

Marty grunted. "You've still got a lot to learn if you believe that. Someone so strong should lead a pack. It's what an alpha is meant to do. Some say it's what they're for, and why they're so strong."

She snorted. "I'm not looking for a pack. I'm single and mean to stay that way."

"Never happen. We can't live alone. You'll see."

**I told you that.**

*I know you did.*

**So did Flint, remember—in your house with Barrows?**

*I remember.*

**Well?**

*Well, we have Lawrence and Farris.*

**Do we?**

*Don't we?*

**He didn't ask us to be his mate.**

So far the sensors on the perimeter were reporting back green. They were basic devices with only two states: red and green. When they sensed something passing between them, they would go red on her display. She hadn't asked for something with more abilities because there were too many variables to cover. Ryder could approach on foot in human form, or he might choose wolf form. He could choose something in between that might fool a more intelligent sensor designed to protect humans against other humans. Ryder could change as much as he wanted, but he would not fool her sensors.

"How's Rebecca?" she asked.

"Scared, but she's holding up. I don't want you thinking she's weak or stupid. She's not. She knows what could happen here."

"I don't think she's stupid for trusting in the Lady. She's just naïve."

"You're wrong, and I'm not just saying that because she's

my mate.”

She shook her head. Marty had undermined himself by protesting that way. “I thought she was your girlfriend.”

“Who told you that?”

“Ben Kirkwood.”

“Oh. I haven’t seen Ben in over a year. Not since Jay joined us. He probably didn’t hear the news because Jay left home about then.”

“That might be...”

A sensor turned red.

“Chris?”

She raised a hand. Another sensor turned red. “He’s here. Go upstairs and keep out of sight. Go!”

She watched as her sensors reported a breach in the perimeter. A red road began heading straight toward the cabin on her display. She watched intently for the first sighting, and suddenly, there he was. The remotes on the roof stopped cycling their output to her headset. Sector Two zoomed in and locked onto Ryder. He was standing on the edge of the woods watching the cabin. He was in human form and unarmed. Not that he needed a gun to kill her, but she was pleased just the same. She watched him watching the cabin, and stroked her rifle.

Ryder stepped out of the woods and ran for the porch. Chris ripped off the headset, tossed it into the corner, and trained her rifle on the open door. The moment he stepped into view, she fired. The magazine ran dry in less than four seconds. She let it fall to the floor, replaced it with a full one, and emptied it into the doorway. The second magazine ran dry, and she waited for some sign that her hunt was over. A creaking behind her broke the silence. She spun in place, the rifle already leveled, but it was only Marty and Rebecca at the top of the stairs watching her. She waved them back into hiding and quickly reloaded.

She approached the doorway warily and stopped. She stared at the empty decking of the porch, and her knuckles

whitened as she firmed her grip on the rifle. She ducked her head out the door for a quick look, but there was no sign of Ryder. Her palms were sweaty; she dried them one at a time on her pants, and then stepped outside. There was blood splatter on the decking. She sniffed the air, turning slowly, and the smell of blood grew stronger. She edged along the porch keeping her back to the wall, and found a blood trail, but to her dismay, it stopped after a dozen feet. The woods beckoned beyond the end of the porch. She didn't want to go out there, but she had to. Ryder was injured. Now was the time to take him down. Wait too long and he might heal before she found him.

She backed down the steps with her rifle aimed at the porch roof. It was the perfect place for Ryder to get the drop on her, but she descended the steps without incident. He wasn't up there. She turned on the spot looking for something to indicate where Ryder was hiding.

"He ran off," she said. Her heart sank when she realized it might be true.

**You don't know that.**

"He's heading back to town."

**You. Don't. Know!**

She felt like screaming in frustration.

Ryder's quiet laughter made her drop to one knee and trigger a burst into the trees. Her heart hammered in her chest and a trickle of sweat made its slow way down from her temple.

**I don't think he ran away.**

"I guess not."

A twig snapped, and she turned that way. Her discipline held this time, and she didn't waste ammunition by firing without a target. She had less than sixty rounds left to end this and only a third of them were silver. Not enough. Not near enough now that Ryder had time to heal up. She had to go in after him before he was back to full strength.

**That's what he wants.**

“What else can I do?”

**Make him come to us.**

“How?”

Smoke had no answer for her and Chris had to make a decision. She stood and carefully approached the tree line. Her eyes penetrated the gloom easily. There was no sign of Ryder, but she did scent his blood. She smiled grimly and stepped fully into the forest. She crouched scanning the trees and undergrowth. Her nose picked up the smell of rotting vegetation, damp earth, crushed soil where someone had passed recently, and fresh blood again. She turned to follow the trail.

“You didn’t take my advice, Chris.”

She froze. He was close, too damn close!

“You shouldn’t have come. I didn’t want this. The Lady as my witness, I didn’t want this for you.”

“Then you shouldn’t have infected me!” she shouted angrily.

She put her back against a towering tree and listened carefully for movement. A breeze ruffled the leaves in her tree and Ryder moved. She didn’t see him, but she *felt* him. She swung on target—he had been approaching her back—and fired a long burst. He went down, but rolled behind a tree before she could finish him. She ran straight toward where she had last seen him, but he was gone again. This time the trail he had left was obvious. Directly away from the cabin.

She pursued.

**Don’t rush to follow.**

She kept running. “Why?”

**That’s what he wants.**

Why would he want... her steps faltered. He was leading her away from the cabin and those it protected. She turned to go back, and Ryder appeared about a hundred yards ahead of her. She fired, missed, fired again. He was gone in the blink of an eye. Lady he was *fast!*

“To your left!” Ryder yelled.

She dropped flat and turned that way. She saw nothing at first, heard nothing but his mad laughter, then he stepped out from behind a tree and she fired. As quick as he had appeared, he was gone.

"Flint would have killed me by now. She never really liked me you know."

She peered into the undergrowth, trying to find him. "I don't like you either. Are you saying you know Flint from somewhere?"

Ryder laughed. "You still don't know what this is all about, do you? Flint always was good at keeping secrets, but I would have thought you would have dragged the story out of her by now."

"I don't like guessing games. You have something to say, say it straight."

"I have a present for you."

The muscles at her jaw bulged as she gritted her teeth. "You have nothing I want."

"Don't be too sure."

"All I want is you dead."

"I understand, but you'll want this. I promise."

She gasped and rolled to look the other way. His voice had come from behind her this time. How had he moved without her sensing it? She peered into the trees and thought she saw something on the ground. She licked her lips and got back to her feet to investigate. She crept through the forest and knelt beside the object. It was a wallet propped upright against a pile of leaves. Crouching beside it, she checked for signs of Ryder before picking it up and opening it.

She stared. "No..."

The wallet contained Ryder's identification—his driving license and FBI identification. She stared at it, unable to believe what it meant. Flint had screwed her over. She shook her head, staring numbly at that impossible badge. She remembered speculating about what Ryder had been holding that day in DD's cubicle. Well, they had been wrong. He

hadn't stolen a cop's I.D to get his hands on the master key it contained. He had used his own. Flint had known who Ryder was. She must have known. That was why she had volunteered to handle the background checks and the profiling. Why had Flint really been assigned to the Shifter Slayings? Was it to help find Ryder, or was it to hide Ryder's true identity?

**Does it matter now?**

*She knew things about him, things that might have helped me find him before...*

**Before he attacked and I joined you. Do you hate me?**

*You know I don't.*

**Then it doesn't matter. Don't let it distract you.**

Smoke was right. What did it matter now why Ryder did what he did, or why Flint did what she did? All that mattered was living with the consequences.

"Right, you're right." She shoved the wallet into her pocket and looked warily around. "I don't care what you were! It's now that matters!"

Silence greeted her shout.

"Did you hear me you sonofabitch?" she shouted again.

**He's gone.**

Realization dawned. "He's gone after Marty!"

**I would if I were he.**

Chris was already running back to the cabin. The clearing appeared before her and she orientated herself toward the cabin. There was no sign of Ryder, but she could hear the sounds of a fight. She sprinted across the open ground and into the cabin without slowing. She caught a glimpse of Ryder at the top of the stairs grappling with Rebecca. Chris stopped, raised the rifle, and fired.

*Click!*

She was out of ammo! She dropped the useless thing and dashed up the stairs just as Ryder threw Rebecca down them. They collided and tumbled back down. There was a crunch and Rebecca wailed like a child. Chris had no time to help the girl; she could hear the fight continuing upstairs. She shoved

Rebecca off, and clambered up the stairs.

Ryder and Marty were in the bedroom. Ryder had changed into his wolf-man form, and the sight shocked her into stillness for a moment. Her nightmares surged to the forefront of her thoughts, but Marty's shrieks brought her back to the here and now.

He wasn't alpha. He only had two forms—human and wolf with nothing in between. Worse than that, it meant he couldn't heal himself as quickly. Ryder's claws had already torn Marty to shreds. Blood covered his hands and arms where he had attempted to protect himself.

Chris changed her hands and attacked Ryder from behind. She buried the claws of one hand in his back and tried to reach around him with the other, hoping to pull him off Marty. He roared in surprise, rearing back in pain and Marty slumped to the floor out of the fight.

Ryder turned, dragging her claws out of his back. "We warned you to stay out of this."

Before she could respond, he slapped her with his claws extended. A fiery pain exploded in her face and she flew across the room. She slammed into the wall, and slid down it, stunned.

Ryder turned back to deal with Marty.

Chris fumbled at her face, shocked to find her jaw broken and her cheek hanging in bloody strips. If he had hit her a little harder, he would have broken her neck. She wasn't sure if she could heal something like that.

**Let me out! Let me kill him for you.**

She started to agree but caught sight of something that gave her hope. Marty's machete lay upon the floor pushed partway under the bed. She lunged and grabbed it. It glinted in the light and was wickedly sharp.

*If this doesn't work, you can have him. I promise.*

Ryder was intent on what he was doing. She couldn't be sure, but she thought Marty might already be dead. Ryder continued his ministrations regardless. He was slamming his

fists into Marty over and over, snarling abuse at him with every strike as if unaware that Marty couldn't hear him.

Chris ignored the pain in her face, and forced herself to her feet. She wobbled as she took a step, and the room spun in her vision, but she was determined that Ryder wouldn't leave here alive. She raised the machete, but her shadow on the wall gave her away.

Ryder turned and leapt at her just as she brought the machete down with all her strength.

She went down under Ryder, turning her face away from his jaws, but he didn't bite. He did nothing but pin her to the floor with his weight. She shoved him off, trying to ignore his staring eyes, and his head lolled.

She scooted backward on her butt, her eyes fixed upon the machete where it had lodged in Ryder's neck. She had hit him so hard that she had nearly decapitated him.

He was dead.

Thank the Lady he was dead! She raised a shaking hand to her face. The pain in her head was pretty bad and she felt dizzy.

*Probably concussion.*

**Let me fix it.**

"Can you?" she said, slurring the words. "I'd appreciate it."

Heat flared within, and her eyes bugged at the sudden pain that roared through her. It felt as if her head was going to explode. For an instant, fur covered her face, and she felt the bones of her jaw shift back into position. The heat faded and with it the pain. She touched her cheek and found it healed.

Chris worked her jaw from side to side. "Thanks."

**Marty isn't dead.**

"No?" She got to her feet and went to check. She felt for a pulse and found one. It was thready and fast, but there. "Marty?"

He groaned.

"Come on wake up, Rebecca needs you."

He groaned again and his eyes flickered open. "Ryder?"  
 "Dead."

He nodded and winced. "Oh Lady I hurt. I think I'm dying."

**He will die very soon if he doesn't heal himself.**

"Probably for the best considering," she said callously. "I think Rebecca is hurt. Maybe dead, I don't know."

"What!"

"Ryder got her before I could do anything."

"No!" Marty howled in grief, already his eyes were changing.

She stepped back as the Change took him, and stayed out of his way when the black-coated wolf he became ran out of the room. She glanced at Ryder one last time before following Marty out.

Rebecca was alive. Marty—healed but naked now that he had changed back to human form—was tending to her. She had broken both legs when Ryder threw her down the stairs. Thinking Marty dead, she hadn't tried to heal herself and had simply waited for Ryder to finish her off—the Lady's will, she said. Her legs had healed by themselves, healed crooked of course. She couldn't stand.

**She is weak, no matter that Marty says different.**

Chris nodded. Rebecca deserved the pain she would receive when Marty got around to breaking her legs to set them properly. Her mate could have died while she prayed to the Lady for help. Chris shook her head at the thought and headed for the door. Behind her, Rebecca cried and Marty stroked her hair, mumbling consolingly.

Descending the porch steps, she took a deep breath of pine-scented air to flush the stink of blood and death out of her lungs. She looked toward the lake. It really was a great view.

*Want to go for a run?*

**Can we hunt?**

*If you want to. Do you think Farris would like to join us?*

**I think he will hunt us down if we don't go back and  
ask him!**

She laughed; it felt good.

\* \* \*

## Epilogue

The night was dark and chill in the city and most people were thinking of their beds, but not Chris. She was waiting for someone. The alley across the street from Area 51 was the perfect vantage from which to watch the club. Her breath smoked, hanging about her head in the cool night air, and she shivered. She tucked her hands under her arms and leaned a shoulder against the wall.

“You know, I think we should get a bike.”

?

“A really fast bike.”

**How fast?**

She grinned. “Oh, I don’t know—one-ninety plus maybe.”

**Is that faster than Lawrence’s Viper?**

“Oh yeah, and the acceleration is way better. Interested?”

**Can we afford it?**

She chuckled and shook her head. “You sound like I used to.”

**Can we?**

“We should be able to pick up something decent if we cash in my insurance policy. Ryan will know someone we can

talk to. What do you think?"

**I like to go fast.**

Chris nodded. She had always enjoyed it too. "I know you do. It's settled then."

She turned her attention back to the club, keeping watch for Loco. Stephen gave her the tip that Loco would be here tonight, but so far, there was no sign of him. Stephen was reliable, but no one could be right all the time. It looked as if this was one of those times. She checked her watch and decided to wait another hour.

**What are we going to do about Flint?**

She shrugged.

**You do still carry Ryder's badge in your pocket.**

She did. It was her talisman against nightmares. Whenever she looked at it, she remembered that Ryder couldn't hurt her anymore. He was dead and buried, buried by Marty in the woods at Sanctuary.

"Dave said Flint left while we were out of town."

**We could find her again and ask her what Ryder meant.**

**Do you think she knows?**

"She knows all right. I knew from the first she had her own agenda. I just didn't know what it was."

**Do you now?**

She grimaced. "You know I have some guesses, but that's all they are. I think OSI sent Ryder after someone at Collard. That's my guess. When he screwed up so spectacularly, they sent Flint to cover up the mess."

**Do you still want to know the truth?**

"You know I do, but..." she sighed, "Ryder is dead, Smoke. What good is the truth to either one of us now? You've heard the expression: curiosity killed the cat?"

**We are wolf, not cat.**

"Smart arse, you know what I meant. Besides, the truth isn't all that great when you come right down to it. It can hurt. I say we let sleeping dogs—or wolves if you like—lie."

**If that's what you want.**

"I think it is... for now at least."

It was after one in the morning when Loco showed up in a cab. She decided to wait until the car left before confronting him. Loco paid the driver and the cab drove off, but before she could do anything, a shadow near the club came to life and greeted him warmly. She stared. It was Tina! It was obvious she had no fear of Loco. She ran to him and they kissed.

She shook her head in disbelief. "Hear that splash? That's my plan going down the drain."

**She doesn't look like she needs rescuing to me,** Smoke said in amusement. **She knows exactly what she wants and how to get it.**

She nodded silently. "She doesn't need us."

She watched the young lovers walk arm in arm through the doors of the club, and did nothing. She shoved her hands in her pockets and walked away.

TC would be pleased to hear the outcome had been peaceful. It meant his truce with the Alley Dogs would continue to hold. No one had heard from Trigger or Cruz, and she didn't expect anyone ever would again. They were probably buried in the desert somewhere outside George AFB. She wouldn't ask, but she bet Pederson could show her exactly where, Jonas too.

The streets were empty, not a cab in sight, but although it was a chilly night it was pleasant enough for a walk. The stars and a sliver of moon were clearly visible in a cloudless sky. She stopped to stare, wondering what Ken would have said the stars held in store for her future.

**A long life, a handsome man, and a very fast motorcycle!**

She laughed.

A car turned into the street and slowly approached. The headlights dazzled her, but the familiar rumble of its motor gave her a thrill of anticipation. It pulled up next to her.

"Need a ride?" Lawrence said, leaning out of the viper.

She smiled and crouched beside the car to look at him.

“Where you headed?”

“Wherever you want.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded. “You want to drive?”

She laughed. He didn’t need to bribe her into his car. She trotted around the viper and got in the passenger seat.

“You drive,” she said, putting on her seat belt.

Lawrence kissed her then stroked her cheek. “Where to?”

“Somewhere we can be alone.”

“I know the perfect place,” he said, and turned his attention to driving fast.

The viper leapt ahead, and Chris smiled.

END

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