



THE LAST REMAINING LIGHT

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TRAGIC VISIONS

I WONDER WHEN THE EMPTINESS WILL GO AWAY. OR AT LEAST BE REPLACED BY PAIN. ANYTHING WOULD BE PREFERABLE TO THE NOTHING INSIDE OF ME.
NANCY A. COLLINS - "PAINT IT BLACK"

As the van moves through the dark streets of Edinburgh, I stare unseeing at the passing blanket of December snow. The view fascinated me when we drove through town earlier tonight, but now it holds no interest. Nothing does. I can't imagine anything ever will.

Though I can't see it in the dark of the van, my hands are covered in a layer of blood and dust, the same dust that fills the bag in my lap. I'm afraid that when I do see it I'll start screaming.

My chest aches from the claws of a demon. I can feel blood still oozing painfully from the wounds, but that ache is nothing compared to the black ice that fills my heart. If Mac were here he'd tell me to heal my wounds, but even though I know it would ease my physical pain, I don't want to do that, not yet. The vitae I hold inside of me is the last that I'll ever drink from him, and I'm not ready to lose that, not even to heal.

I wonder if the Tremere will try to force someone else's vitae on me now that Mac's gone. I'm afraid of what I'll do if they try.

The van stops moving and a moment later Victoria moves into my line of vision, saying something to me. I can't really hear her. All I can hear is the terrible screams of the demon when Mac shoved the knife into its heart, Mac's final scream just before he....

Finally her words penetrate the dark haze my mind is wrapped in. She wants me to heal the still bleeding wound on my chest. She tells me that Mac would have wanted me to take care of myself, and so I obey, concentrating on healing the wound. Pain radiates from the area until my body starts to shiver. Nausea washes over me and I swallow hard to keep the bile down.

I know that claws from a supernatural creature cause wounds that are hard to heal, but I can't understand how the demon has done so much damage that my attempt to heal does little more than stem the flow of blood.

When someone calls my name I look up, but I don't really see who is there. A hand on my arm prompts me to move and I clutch the bag of dust to my stomach, not ready to let it go. I walk where I'm told to and sit when I'm told to, but it's all I can do to keep from screaming.

In my mind, I'm still lying on the ground at Roslyn Chapel, helplessly watching the body of my lover crumble to dust. All I can see is a lifetime of pain and emptiness ahead of me. Though I hold Mac's remains in my hands, I can find no comfort in knowing that at least this time I have something to bury.

Some time later, I realize that Victoria is talking to me again. It takes me a minute to realize that we're in the castle, in the bedroom I had shared with Mac, and that I'm sitting at the table still clutching his remains. She looks as if she expects me to do something, but I don't know what she wants from me.

"We need to get your shirt off and take a look at these wounds," she says softly.

Dimly I realize that she's said this more than once. I lay the bundle of clothes and dust on my lap and start to take off my ruined jacket. The movement pulls against the gashes on my chest and I flinch, fighting the pain and waves of nausea.

Victoria helps me get the jacket off, then the body armor Mac had insisted I wear and the shirt beneath, even my blood soaked bra. I want her to leave me alone, but I can't form the

words to tell her so I sit motionless as she prods at the wound, cleaning and dressing it. Her hands are cold on my skin, but I can't really feel them. All I feel is the pain from my wound and the chill seeping through my soul.

It seems like forever until I'm cleaned and clothed to her satisfaction, but still she doesn't leave until Eddie comes into the room. He sits on the edge of the bed watching me thoughtfully. I might feel uncomfortable under his gaze if it wasn't for the fact that having Eddie watch me is far better than dealing with Joseph's hungry gaze. The newly born vampire makes me feel like I'm a banquet he's just waiting to feast on.

"Do you need anything?" Eddie asks me.

I look at him, really seeing him there for the first time since Mac had crumbled to dust. His eyes are dark with worry, and I begin wonder what's going to happen to him now that his master is gone. I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I can't voice the worry that we'll both be turned over to other masters.

My eyes fall on our suitcases, and I close my eyes, not wanting to see our things, Mac's things, left about as if he's coming back to them any moment. I'm afraid that if I look hard enough, I'll actually see him here with me.

"Is there someone you want me to call?" Eddie asks, sounding as cool and composed as ever. "Corrine?"

I don't understand how his voice can be so calm. The world as we knew it is gone, crumbled to the dust that lay on my lap.

"No," I tell him, somehow managing to give my voice a reasonable amount of calm. "Not on the phone." Hell, I can't even imagine the words to tell my daughter what happened. She's only known him for a year, how will she take the news that her father is dead?

"Cormac's family?" he prompts softly. "Friends in Nashville?"

I can only nod at the last, and watch while he takes out a cell phone and dials. Glenn Johnson will know what to tell Mac's family, he'd been the one to break the news twenty years ago, the first time Mac had died.

"Mr. Johnson, this is Eddie Lane," he says softly into the phone. "Cormac is dead." Hearing the words spoken so bluntly makes me want to scream and I bite the inside of my lip to keep the sound from breaking free.

I know I should be crying, and my eyes burn like hell sure enough, but my mourning goes too deep for tears. Tears can't begin to fill the hole left in my heart, they can't bring Mac back to me, so what good would it do me to cry? All I can do is sit here and wonder how I'm supposed to live now that the light is gone from my life.

"I don't know," Eddie says gravely into the phone, drawing my attention away from my grief, "given what she is and that she has no master now, there's no telling what they will do to her."

A new thought invades my mind, one I can't ignore or drive away. Even with Mac dead, I know that his clan will not let me go. It's not every night they come across a Dhampyr, a human born of a vampire. My mother's blood has always run through me, tainting me, damning me to this life of darkness. I tried to cut her blood from my veins once. I remember watching it spill out on the bed and was glad to be rid of it. Of course, Kate always had to be in control. She put it back.

Control. Earlier today, Eddie told me that my problems were all about control, and he's right. I hate anyone having control over me, but for the past year I've let Mac take control. I don't—I didn't mind, I'd liked knowing that I could count on him to take care of me. Now he's

left me to take care of myself, and it scares me. I don't know if I can take care of myself anymore, or if I even want to try.

For real now, I've never felt more like giving up control. A part of me even longs for the drug-induced haze that Eddie had introduced me to so many years ago. I wonder if Eddie really has quit the stuff like he says, or if he has something that will deaden the pain in my soul. I know a warrior has to stay sharp, like the edge of a blade, to survive in this world of darkness, but I've been a dagger for too long. I think it's time to let the blade dull.

The clan won't let me go, and Mac will never come back. Those two thoughts chase each other through the darkness of my mind, but I can see no resolution. A part of me doesn't care. With Mac gone, there's nothing left for me to do but die.

The Tremere won't let me go. They'll try to bond me to someone else, but I can't imagine drinking from anyone but Mac. I'm afraid that if they try to make me, I'll do something permanent and fatal to whoever they pick as my new master. I don't think Ford will let me live if I kill another Tremere without permission, not after the last time.

Of course, if the clan kills me, I'll become one of them. Mac had worked a ritual on me that guarantees I'll become a vampire when I die, just like Joseph did. The catch with Mac's blood is that when I turn, I won't remember anything or anyone from my past. I won't remember my lover, or watching him die, again.

The thought is so tempting that I almost reach for the knife at my belt. I can see myself slitting my wrists and letting my mother's damning blood drain out onto the stone floor until oblivion claims me. In death, I will find the peace of never remembering how much I've lost tonight. I sink to the floor and close my eyes as the life drains from my body, waiting for the end.

I blink and realize that I'm still sitting at the table, the skin of my wrists unbroken. As tempting as the forgetfulness of death is, I can't do it, not here, not yet. Eddie is off the phone and watching me again. If I try to hurt myself, he'll try to stop me, and I'm not sure I want to be stopped. I push the idea of death away for now, and concentrate on finding another way to get through the next minute, and the one after that.

I sit at the table while Eddie packs our things, mine and Mac's. I try not to watch as he handles things Mac had been the last to touch. I can't bring myself to help him.

Some time later, I realize that Eddie is talking to me, telling me that it's time to go home. Home. That word sounds so strange that at first I can't wrap my mind around it. Home has always been where Mac is, but now he's gone.

When Eddie gives me a bag to carry out of the room, I place Mac's remains carefully inside of it. I carry the bag out of the room, out of the castle, and into the van, where I hold it on my lap. The ride to the airport is quiet, the air full of sorrow. It reminds me that while Mac was my world, he was also a friend to these people.

I get out of the van at the airport with the bag in my hand and let Eddie's hand on my elbow lead me toward the plane. Suddenly a gateway opens to my right and before I can think about it my body reacts, burning blood to make me faster. A wave of nausea crashes over me as single gun shot rings out. I feel Eddie push me toward the gateway and I stumble through it, uncaring about what may be on the other side. A part of me hopes that it is death come to claim me.

Waiting hands try to catch me, but I'm too far off balance. I hit something hard with my face and taste blood in my mouth. The cream carpet is soft against my skin, but the warmth of the room only makes the nausea worse.

Gentle hands turn and lift me to a sitting position. I raise a hand to wipe my mouth and my fingers come away red with blood from a cut on my lip. My eyes see the shine of the gold on my finger, and I can't stop from staring at the rings that Mac had given me, but all I can see is his body crumbling to dust right before my eyes.

Something snaps deep inside my mind as screams echo through the room.

It should have gone off without a hitch. There was no sign of Marbas' followers at Roslyn Chapel, and Victoria parked the van within walking distance of the church. Once Mac and Eddie were satisfied that there was no one there, the Tremere began summoning the demon.

We watched as it manifested inside the binding circle. Mac was waiting with the knife we'd been told would destroy it, and as soon as the demon was physically present, Mac thrust the blade into its chest.

The demon's screams were horrible, and it was an effort not to cover my ears. I pulled my gun and hoped that the first blow would be all that Mac needed to kill the demon. When he saw that it wasn't, he twisted the knife, but it only seemed to piss the demon off. A moment later, Mac went flying from the circle.

I aimed and fired, thankful that I had the weapon. I didn't want to be close enough to use a knife on this thing that looked like a dark evil angel. The bullet ripped through the demon's leg at the knee, leaving it hanging by a thread.

A second shot rang out, and one of the demon's wings exploded in a shower of dark feathers and blood. I was close enough to be splattered by the blood, and it burned where it fell on my bare flesh. The distant sound of gunfire told me that Eddie had fired as well, but I couldn't see if the shot had done any damage.

Just as I was about to squeeze the trigger again, the demon turned toward me. Unfortunately, I was standing close enough for its claws to rake across my chest and shoulder, and I fell backward, outside of the circle of chalk. Apparently the armored shirt I wore couldn't stand up to such an attack, and blood flowed freely from the wound, soaking the tank top that lay against my skin.

Though the blow had driven the breath from my lungs, I still managed to fire the gun, but this time the bullet only creased its remaining leg. I heard two more gunshots in quick succession, and the demon fell to the ground as its remaining wing disappeared in a shower of feathers and blood.

Before I could regain my feet, Mac was there, straddling the demon, running the knife across its throat. He hadn't quite completed the stroke when the demon reached up and plunged its clawed hands into Mac's chest. My lover screamed in agony and in the moment of his final death, I finally saw the fangs he had kept hidden from me all this time. A moment later the demon died, its hands falling limply to the ground through a cloud of dust that had once been Cormac Brennan.

I sat there on the asphalt watching as Mac crumbled to dust, refusing to believe my eyes. I couldn't believe it was happening, I couldn't believe it was real. There had to be something to explain what I'd seen, anything other than believing that Mac was gone.

People moved in and out of my line of vision, but all I could see was the dust lying on and around the body of the demon. I kept waiting for him to come to me, to check on me as he did after every battle, but in my heart I knew that he'd never do that again. Mac was gone.

I felt hands on my chest moving aside the tattered remains of my clothing. Distantly I could feel the burning path the demon's claws had made in my flesh. After a moment I brushed the hands aside and stood, walking slowly over to where I had last seen my lover.

Eddie and Joseph were kneeling beside the demon's body, gathering up the clothing and equipment that lay on and among the dust. I fell to my knees between them, reaching out to touch the pile of dust that they had gathered and were sweeping into a plastic bag.

Blood from my wound ran down my arms and wet my hands as I brushed the men aside and took the bag from Joseph, sweeping the last of Mac's remains inside the bag. I felt a hand on my uninjured shoulder but ignored it to begin folding Mac's clothes, pouring what dust I could from them into the bag as well. The blood on my hands mixed with the dust until it formed a thin coating I couldn't bring myself to brush away.

When I'd gathered everything I could I stayed there beside the fallen demon. My eyes burned, but I knew I couldn't cry, not here, not now. I'd shed my tears for Mac twenty years ago, now there was nothing left inside of me but emptiness. Around me I could hear voices, but the only thing that was clear to me was Mac's agonized scream as he crumbled to dust.

The scream echoes through the room, through my soul, and the pain the sound carries would be enough to break my heart if it wasn't already in pieces. I cover my ears to block the noise, but it doesn't help. The screaming rips through me, cutting what's left of my heart to shreds.

Strong hands on my shoulders shake me, trying to get my attention, and somehow I manage to focus on Glenn's worried face. I want to beg him to stop the screaming, but I can't form the words. It takes me a long time to realize that I'm the one screaming.

When I reach out and grab a hold of Glenn's shirt the screams finally stop. It's only now that I realize I was wrong to think I have no tears left. They cover my face, and I can't make them stop falling. Glenn takes me in his arms, pulling me closer until my head lies on his chest.

"Mac's dead," I whisper against the fabric of his shirt, my voice hoarse from screaming. "For real this time, Glenn. He's gone."

"I know," he murmurs, running his hands soothingly up and down my back. "I know."

The initial shock of Mac's death is wearing off and the dam holding my grief is broken. I cry in Glenn's arms as I've never cried before. Even when I'd lost Mac twenty years ago, when I'd wanted nothing more than to follow him into what I'd thought was his death, I hadn't cried like this. Then I would have stared into the darkness of my own soul until I'd died, if it hadn't been for the baby growing inside of me. This time there is nothing standing between me and the dark arms of death.

Once begun, the flood of tears is a long time ending. I cry until I exhaust myself and fall asleep in the circle of Glenn's arms.

FADE TO BLACK

DEATH BEFORE MY EYES, LYING NEXT TO ME
I FEAR SHE BECKONS ME, SHALL I GIVE IN?
EVANESCENCE - WHISPER

I woke when Glenn laid me on a bed, but I kept my eyes closed even after he moved away. I wanted to be alone, and I knew he'd stay if he thought I was awake. He turned on a dim light before he left, closing the door softly behind him.

The room wasn't familiar to me when I opened my eyes. I thought maybe we were in Nashville, but I didn't care enough to go to a window and look. I sat up on the edge of the bed and waited out the dizziness that clouded my mind. When it passed, I stood and walked toward the light Glenn had turned on in the adjoining bathroom. As much as I would have liked to lay unmoving in the bed forever, nature called.

The light was bright in the bathroom, and I closed my eyes against the glare. The sound of the toilet flushing was loud enough to make me wince, emphasizing the pounding in my temples. I brushed the tangled hair out of my eyes and leaned on the sink to look in the mirror, not sure what to expect.

The face that stared back at me was pale and wan, the eyes swollen from crying. There was a split on my lower lip, and I vaguely recalled hitting a low table on my way to the floor after stumbling through the gateway. My throat was sore and I looked down, remembering with shame the screaming fit I'd thrown. The hardest part was realizing that I could easily do it all over again. Mac was gone.

I fell to my knees in front of the toilet and emptied my stomach into the porcelain bowl. I threw up until there was nothing left, and then I threw up some more. Finally only dry heaves wracked my body.

I flushed the bile away and sat back against the side of the tub, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. I was tired, dead tired, and my head was still spinning. The taste of vomit was sharp in my mouth, but I couldn't bring myself to get up and rinse it away. The only thing I wanted was Mac to come back to me, and I knew that would never happen. He was dead, really dead, and no matter what I did, I would never change that bitter truth.

When Mac had come back to me a year ago, I hadn't exactly welcomed him with open arms. He hadn't remembered me at first, but once the memories started flooding back into his mind, it was as if nothing had changed between us, even though everything had. Eventually we were able to work things out, and we'd begun exchanging blood. Mine kept him alive, and his....

Carefully, I reached down and pulled off my left boot. A quick push on a hidden trigger revealed a compartment filled with glass beads the size of small marbles. Each one held some of Mac's blood, filled by his magic for a time when I needed his vitae but couldn't get it from him. I'd never thought it would happen like this.

I knew I'd put off healing long enough. I needed to replace the blood that I lost and used in Edinburgh, had to heal the injury the demon's claws had made. As much as I was tempted to curl up and die, there was much to do before I decided whether I was going to take that out.

Mac's remains had to be taken to his family. There was something to bury this time, and I wanted to see that it was done right. He would have wanted to be laid to rest beside his brother in the family cemetery on the hill overlooking his parent's house.

I also wanted to make sure Corrine knew how bravely her father had died. It wouldn't make his death any easier on her, but at least she'd know he hadn't died in vain. I hoped that Mac's family would share their grief with her. I wasn't planning on sharing my pain with anyone, not even our daughter. Mac was gone.

It occurred to me that I was still putting off healing. While I couldn't remember too clearly, it seemed to me that something had gone wrong the last time I'd tried to heal. It might have been the pain of losing Mac, but I didn't think so.

Pushing aside my fear, I picked up one of the glass beads and put it in my mouth. I carefully bit down on it and almost gagged on the flow of liquid that filled my throat as the bead dissolved. The rich taste of Mac's vitae made me want to cry, and I had to force myself to concentrate on swallowing.

Warmth flooded my body, a warmth that was so achingly familiar. For over a year I'd fed from Mac's blood, and while I hadn't liked the idea at first, I'd grown to love both the taste and the way it made me feel.

All my life I'd been able to use blood, first mine, then Mac's, to heal, to make myself stronger, faster, to hit harder than a normal human could ever hope to. Now all I felt was fear of what it would do to me when I tried to use it. Pushing those thoughts aside, I put three more beads in my mouth one by one, carefully swallowing every bit of vitae they held before closing the boot heel.

Kindred blood gives a different high than drugs, a better rush, more controlled. After seeing how my foster mother had acted on the blood, I'd sworn never to drink from that crimson fountain. Then Mac had come back into my life and I'd had no choice really, not if I wanted to be with him. Drinking from him had been so sweet, so different than I'd thought it would be. But then a lot of things had been different, with Mac.

My body felt warm again, full of strength. Even the nausea was fading fast. I waited for the heat to move into my limbs before trying to heal the cut on my mouth. The room spun around me and when I touched my lip, it felt like the wound was barely a week old. It should have been nothing but a faded scar.

I didn't understand what was happening. I'd healed much worse wounds in my life, and only had this problem when I was very low on blood. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the claw marks on my chest and shoulder, sending blood to the area to knit the flesh back together. An instant later, I was grateful to have the tub behind me for support. The wound was no better and now I felt hot, as if I'd stood in the sun hours too long.

I'd never felt that way before. I'd never been sick a day in my life, and now I was so lightheaded and dizzy I couldn't think straight. The nausea was back with a vengeance, and it was all I could do not to empty my stomach again.

Last night I'd longed for something to dull my mind, but this wasn't exactly what I'd wanted. I ran a hand across my eyes and struggled to bring some sense to my jumbled thoughts. If this kept up, I'd have to let the cuts on my chest heal naturally, and that would take weeks, maybe even months.

The fog that covered my mind made it impossible for me to push aside the memory of Mac's death. I gave into the weakness that had invaded my body and slid to my side on the tile floor, curling into a ball.

If only... oh, but I've tried so hard not to live in the might-have-beens. I had to live in the world that was, not the world I wanted. Of course, the way I was feeling, I wasn't not sure I'd ever leave that room, not alive anyway. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered, not anymore.

I would have thought that I'd cried myself dry in Glenn's arms, but it wasn't true. Turns out there would never be enough tears for me to cry. Mac was gone.

SHARED GRIEF

IF I COULD CHANGE, I WOULD
TAKE BACK THE PAIN I WOULD
RETRACE EVERY WRONG MOVE THAT I MADE I WOULD
LINKIN PARK - EASIER TO RUN

I woke with a jerk when someone tried to lift me. I opened my eyes, not sure where I was at first. I'd lost all track of time, didn't even know if it was day or night. Didn't really care. Mac was gone.

Then I realized that Corrine was with me, trying to lift me from the cold tile floor. The sadness in her eyes told me that she knew her father was dead. Knowing how much she would miss him made me start crying again. I opened my arms and she moved into them, but instead of me comforting her, she comforted me. My little girl really had grown up.

She soothed my hair while she let me cry. After a few minutes, she pulled back and took my face in her hands. "Come on," she said softly. "Let's get you into bed."

I let her help me up but as I took a step toward the door I realized that I only had one boot on. Leaning back against the wall I took the other boot off, then bent to pick up the one I'd taken off earlier.

I didn't let myself think as we went into the bedroom. I knew if I did I would fall apart again.

The sight of the gym bag that held Mac's remains was almost my undoing. I put my boots on the floor next to it and sat down on the edge of the bed, staring at it. If Corrine hadn't been there, I might have taken the bag of dust out and held it, but I didn't want her to see what was left of her father, not yet.

"I'm so sorry, luv," I told her as tears spilled down my cheeks. "It all happened so fast, I couldn't stop it, I couldn't—" The hole in my heart was too big, swallowing my words. The tears took over, and I was lost to them once more.

Corrine knelt down in front of me and took my face in her hands again. "I realize that I don't know what's happened yet," she began, tears filling her eyes, "but I know that it couldn't have been your fault and I won't let you do this to yourself." She pulled me into her arms and held me tightly. "Whatever happened, happened. Mac wouldn't want you to do this to yourself."

I couldn't stop from clinging to her again, sobs wracking my body. How could I tell her that it didn't matter what Mac would have wanted? He was dead, gone, and nothing would ever make me feel better.

"I couldn't do anything," I said through my tears, pulling back to look at Corrine, but only seeing Mac dying before my eyes, hearing him scream his last breath. "I'm so sorry, Corrine."

She climbed onto the bed beside me. "It's not your fault," she repeated as she pulled me backward until we were lying side by side. "Just sleep now. We can talk about this later. Can I stay with you?"

I rolled over to take her in my arms, but once again, it was she that comforted me. I closed my eyes, trying to hide from her the pain that was eating me alive. I wanted to say so much, to tell her how brave her father had been, how she should be proud that he'd died a hero, but I knew that if I tried to explain, I'd only start crying again. It was better to wait until I could control my grief.

Eventually I fell asleep in the circle of my daughter's arms, wishing she were Mac. My dreams were full of him. I saw him everywhere, but I could never get close enough to touch. Finally I dreamed of watching him die, and I woke with his scream in my ears and a scream of my own on my lips. It took me a moment to figure out where I was.

I felt warm arms around me, and Corrine was there, telling me I was okay, that I was safe. I let her hold me, wanting so badly to believe her, but I knew she was wrong. Mac was gone. Nothing would ever be okay again.

Once I'd gotten a hold of myself, I pulled back enough to look at her. "I'm sorry," I said softly, trying to smile reassuringly. "Didn't mean to wake you." I started to run a hand through my hair to get it out of my eyes, but the demon's blood had tangled it.

"You didn't wake me," she said softly, watching me.

"Any idea what time it is?" My head was so screwed up I didn't even know if the sun was up. "Hell, I don't even know where we are."

She looked down at her watch and told me it was a little after six, which meant the sun was indeed up. "We're in Nashville," she added. "At Glenn and Siofra's."

I nodded absently. "I thought so, but I wasn't sure." I looked at Corrine, studying her face for a moment and seeing the sadness it held. "How are you doing? You okay?"

She smiled weakly and nodded. "It's early. You should try to sleep some more."

"No, I couldn't," I told her. There was too much to do, and I knew if I closed my eyes, I'd just see Mac dying all over again. Or worse, I'd see him there with us. I could almost smell him as it was. I got out of bed, hoping to occupy my mind with something else, anything else. "I need to find out if Glenn's told the Brennans yet, and see if he'll take me there. I want to take Mac home."

"Siofra and I went to see them last night," she told me. She moved off the other side of the bed and added, "Why don't you go have a shower and I'll see about getting us some breakfast then?"

I couldn't help but grimace at the thought of food. I wasn't sure I could face eating after emptying my stomach last night, but a shower sounded good. I'd be able to get the demon bits out of my hair, at least. "I'm not real hungry, Corrine."

I crouched down near the bag I'd brought with me and almost opened it before I remembered that Mac's remains were on top of my clothes. I picked up the bag and my boots instead, wincing when the movements pulled at the wounds on my chest. "How did they take it?" I asked her.

She looked down at her hands. "About as good as can be expected, I guess. I didn't know what to say." Her sorrow made me want to cry, but before I could say anything, she looked up at me. "Eliza, you have to eat," she insisted stubbornly. "Don't fight me on this. I'm not expecting you to gobble down country breakfasts like Mom makes, but you do have to eat something."

I almost argued with her, but I didn't. Maybe I'd just gotten used to taking orders.

"Let me just get a shower," I told her. "I'll be downstairs in a couple of minutes." Without waiting for her answer, I took my things into the bathroom and closed the door.

I turned on the shower and took off my clothes, carefully peeling away the bandages Victoria had taped to my chest the night before. The wounds were red and warm to the touch, but I wasn't about to try healing them. I needed to be strong for Corrine, and if healing made me sick again she'd never leave me alone.

The water was hot on my skin, but I didn't mind. It took three rounds of shampooing to get the blood and bits out of my hair and I watched the last of it go down the drain with a sense of detachment. If only all of my problems were so easily handled. I pushed the thought aside, not ready to think about the future yet; I had to concentrate on getting through each moment as they came. I had to get Mac's remains to Ireland, after that I'd worry about what I was going to do next.

I had a bad moment while I was drying off. I looked into the fogged mirror over the sink and for the space of a heartbeat I thought I saw Mac standing beside me. When I blinked, the image was gone.

"Mac," I whispered, reaching out to touch the empty reflection. "Why did you leave me?"

There was no answer. I closed my eyes and wished I'd been the one in the binding circle with the demon. Mac was strong, he would have handled my death much better than I was handling his. He would have known what to do. Without him, I was lost.

I found a first aid kit under the sink, and after bandaging my chest again I went downstairs. Corrine was in the kitchen making breakfast. Glenn was there as well, feeding little Ian a bottle. Remembering how I'd acted the night before I was hesitant to join them, but I knew I couldn't hide forever. Glenn was my ticket to Ireland.

Taking a deep breath, I joined Corrine near the stove. "Need help?" I asked softly.

She smiled and hugged me, kissing my cheek. "I'm okay. How are you feeling?"

I wasn't sure how I was supposed to be feeling, but I tried to smile. "Clean," I replied. It was the only honest thing I could say.

Siofra joined us as we were putting the food on the table. She kissed Glenn and the baby, and touched my shoulder sympathetically. I could see pain in her eyes, and it took all I had not to start crying again, especially when she asked me to tell her what had happened to Mac.

Corrine came to my rescue. "Why don't we wait until we get to Grandfather's," she suggested firmly. "That way Eliza will only have to tell the story once." Thankfully, Siofra agreed.

For Corrine's sake I tried very hard to behave as though my heart hadn't been ripped from my chest, but it was difficult. I couldn't eat much, but then again none of us did. I took care of Glenn and Siofra's son while the three of them cleaned up the kitchen, then it was off to gather our things for the trip to Ireland.

Glenn offered to carry my bag, but despite its weight pulling on my wounds, I wouldn't give it up. I wanted to hold on to Mac as long as I could. Once I handed him over, I'd really have nothing left of him.

It was nearly eight in the morning when we stepped through the gateway Glenn made, but it was early afternoon when we stepped onto Irish soil. Mac's parents were waiting for us, and no one was missed by their tearful hugs, not even me. I felt like an imposter, like I had no right to be there, but they treated me like family. I was grateful that Corrine stuck by my side through the whole thing. She kept me from feeling even more out of place.

Noinen told us to get our things settled upstairs and to come down to the living room when we were ready. I was relieved that she had put Corrine and me in a room together upstairs. Mac and I used to share his old room when we came to visit them, but I didn't think I could face being in that room now that he was gone.

I asked Corrine to give me a moment alone and took that time to wrap the bag that held Mac's remains in a towel before going downstairs. It was going to be hard for me to tell his

family what happened, but I owed it to them. If I'd gone to them the first time Mac had died, so many things might have been different. I wanted to do things right this time.

Everyone was waiting for me in the living room, including Cara and Stephen. I sat down next to Corrine on one of the couches near the chair Alaster was in, and when Noinen offered me a drink, I asked for whisky. Corrine looked at me with understanding and took my hand.

The small talk seemed to have dried up with my arrival. Glenn and Stephen eyed the bundle on my lap, but it was Alaster who spoke first. "Can you tell us what happened, lass?" he asked softly.

After a bracing sip from the glass Noinen had given me, I took a deep breath and began. It was hard telling them about the demon Marbas and his plan to destroy the sun, but not as hard as it was when I got further into the story. My words stumbled when I told them about the Inquisition house in Edinburgh, how the demon had killed Joseph and kept coming back every time Eddie and I killed the body it was in. Siofra asked me how Joseph had woken a vampire at sundown, and I had to explain the ritual Victoria had done on him to make it happen.

There were things I left out. I didn't volunteer the fact that Mac had cursed me in the same way, and I didn't explain why the Tremere had spent a few hours with Joseph while Eddie and I readied our weapons for the assault. I might not be a Tremere ghoul anymore, but there was no reason for me to give up some of their secrets.

It hurt to tell them about what Mac had done to ready himself for battle, but I managed, then went on to talk about our trip to Roslyn chapel and the binding circles the vampires had made. That's when the telling really got rough.

"Mac wanted to be in the circle the Demon would show up in." I hated that my voice shook, but I couldn't stop it. "He stabbed it, but I think he missed the heart. It screamed," I said softly, wanting to cover my ears even now at just remembering the sound. "Then it threw him out of the circle."`

I took another sip of the whisky to wet my throat. I didn't want to continue, but I knew I had to. "We shot at it, Joseph, Eddie and me. Blood and feathers flew everywhere, but it didn't seem to phase it. It turned and clawed me," I told them, touching my chest where the wounds still ached. "I fell out of the circle, out of reach. We shot it again and this time it went down."

It was hard for me to look up at Alaster. I knew that Siofra had blamed me for Mac's mortal death, and I wasn't sure if any of them would find me at fault this time. I wouldn't argue with them if they did. I should have insisted on being in that inner circle with Mac. Together we might have taken the demon without one of us dying, or if I'd been the one to fall, I'd have risen soon after, just as Joseph had.

"Before I could do anything else, Mac was on the demon, cutting its throat, but the demon was too fast, its claws went into his chest—" Tears spilled down my cheeks, but I had to finish what I'd begun. I unwrapped the bag of dust and handed it to Alaster. "I brought what I could home to you," I told him, fighting a losing battle with my tears. "He would have wanted—"

My voice broke and I couldn't go on. I turned to Corrine and laid my head on her shoulder as she pulled me into her arms. We cried together, all of us, and somehow sharing of our grief made it just a little easier to bear.

DARK THOUGHTS

LOST IN THIS HOLE
THAT HAS TRIPPED THROUGH MY SOUL
MELISSA ETHERIDGE - PLEASE FORGIVE ME

Despite the bonding we'd done in our grief over Mac, I wanted nothing more than to get away from everyone. Everyone but Corrine, that was. She saw me going out for a walk and wanted to go too. Maybe she wanted to be there for me, but deep down I think she was worried I'd do something stupid.

The sun was bright on the snow, and the wind was biting, but I hoped that the fresh air would clear my head. We walked behind the house and up the path that led to the cemetery without speaking, and stopped in front of Angus' head stone to look down at it. The last time I'd stood in that spot, Mac had been with me. Hell, I could almost feel him there with us now.

"Do you ever wonder what he was like?" Corrine asked softly, looking down at her uncle's grave.

"Yeah, sometimes," I admitted. "Mac used to talk about him. They were really close." I put my arm around her shoulders, leaning into her a little. "He was bummed that Angus died before he could remember him."

Her voice shook as she wrapped her arms around my waist. "Do you think they're together now?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "Werewolves believe in reincarnation, most mages too. They believe that becoming a vampire takes a person out of the loop, more or less." I didn't want to think that had happened to Mac. I wanted to believe he was happy somewhere, that no pain would ever touch him again. "But I hope they're together."

"Me, too," she said with a small smile as she ran her hand up and down my arm like she used to when she was little. "What will you do now? You aren't still bound to the Tremere, are you?"

"I don't know. The agreement with them was that I'd be Mac's ghoul. There was nothing about what would happen if he—" The reminder that he was gone nearly took my breath away. "I know they'll want me back."

"But what do you want?" she asked me. "That's the question."

My laugh was low and rough, a harsh sound even to my ears. "I want Mac back, but I'm not going to get that, am I? Miracles don't happen twice."

She turned to face me. "In the next few days you are going to have to make some choices," she said seriously. "You don't have to go back to the Tremere if you don't want to. I can help you get away from them and I'm sure Glenn and Siofra will too." Her eyes were so sad. It reminded me of when I'd first gone to work for the Inquisition and she'd thought I'd abandoned her. "If you decide not to go back, Salem won't be a safe place for you."

"I know," I replied softly. "I wouldn't be able to take care of you any more." I tried to smile, but the tears in my eyes made it hard. I reached out and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, part of me wishing she was still a child, part of me so proud of the woman she'd become. "But you're a big girl now, right? You can take care of yourself."

"Yes, I can take care of myself but that doesn't mean that I don't want you around," she told me. Tears filled her eyes and she looked down. "You are my best friend. Things make sense when you're around. I don't want you to leave Salem but I don't want you in danger, either."

I knew that if I couldn't return to Salem I'd miss her just as much as she'd miss me. "I'm a big girl too, remember?" I said as I pulled her into my arms. "It's been a while, but I think I can take care of myself."

I hoped that was true, I hoped that I wasn't lying to her. For so long I'd lived from one day to the next, just doing what had to be done, first for her sake, then to be with Mac. I didn't know if I could live for myself. "I don't know what I'm going to do yet. I'm not ready to think about it. I just... I want to get through this."

"One day at a time," she whispered, resting her head on my shoulder. "That's all we can do."

"I miss him," I sighed against the soft silk of her dark hair. "It's like I can't breathe."

"I know, honey," she said, lifting her head to look me in the eyes. "I can't know how you feel to lose him like you have and I know it's no consolation but I love you and I'm here for you, always."

I cupped the side of her face and tried not to cry. "My baby, you're so much like him, you always were. You know that he loved you, don't you? He loved you so much."

She nodded and closed her eyes as her tears spilled down her cheeks. "In his way he loved both of us. I wish I'd had more time with him."

"Neither of you could have known that something like this would happen." I rested my forehead against Corrine's and tried very hard not to cry. "Maybe I should go back to the Tremere. I could stay in Salem, we could still spend time together."

"No," she said quickly. "As much as I want you to be around I don't want you to do something just for me." She pulled back and looked at me earnestly. "That would be selfish of me to ask that of you and you would end up hating me for it in the end."

She was forgetting that for ten years I'd done murder and worse for her safety, but I wasn't about to remind her of that now. "Honey, I could never hate you, not ever, no matter what. I love you, don't you know that?" My tears started falling and I knew it was pathetic, but I couldn't stop them, or the words that echoed through the empty places in my soul. "I just don't know what to do without him here. I keep thinking he's going to show up and tell me what to do. I got used to him knowing what the right thing was, and now I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Eliza, it's time that you have to start to live for yourself," she chastised me. "In the past you were running from your mother, then hunting as a way of getting back at her. After you thought Mac was dead you went to work for the Tremere to protect me. I know it's hard to conceive but given time you have to begin to live for you."

She stopped to take a deep breath and wipe at her eyes. "You've been the best possible mother in the world, the best friend that I have ever known, as well as the strongest person I've ever met in my life. I'm not saying that I think you should go out and paint the town red tomorrow. What I *am* saying is that I'm terrified that you will crawl into a corner somewhere and let yourself die. I won't let you do that."

How did she know that that's exactly what I felt like doing? I wasn't strong, I never had been. I needed Mac to be strong, but he was gone. I put my arms around her, held her close, and lied as best I could. "You don't have to be afraid for me luv. I'll get by. I always do."

"You have to promise me you won't," she pleaded, her voice full of unshed tears. "If I lose you too I don't know what I'll do. You know about me, my life, and you don't judge me for it. You and Mac are the only ones who just accepted me for what I am. You understand me."

"That's not true, luv. Everyone here has accepted you for what you are. They love you just like I do." I pulled back and looked her in the eye. I couldn't promise not to do what she was afraid I'd do, but I had to say something. "You're not going to lose me. Someone's got to take care of you."

She smiled wryly. "It's not the people here that I'm worried about." She shook her head a little, and her smile became more genuine. "Do you want to sit here awhile?"

"No, I'd rather walk on, if you don't mind." I wiped away the remains of the tears on my face and took Corrine's hand, leading her through the gap in the back of the fence to the trail that led away from the house. "Tell me what's been going on. It's been a while since we had a chance to talk."

We talked for a little while about her plans, that she'd cut back on college to have more time to study magic and how she and her friend Samantha McLean had decided to study each other's traditions. It wouldn't be easy for either of them, but I had full confidence that she could do it. She was smart, like her father. She mentioned her adoptive parents and her plans to go home for Christmas, and how her boyfriend Brian had been very busy lately.

The path led to a point of land that jutted out over the ocean, and I let go of Corrine's hand to walk toward the water, taking care not to go too close to the crumbling earth at the edge. If I went close enough I'd start thinking about going over, and thoughts like that weren't good ones, not with my daughter there watching.

"It's beautiful here, isn't it?" I murmured, ignoring the cold and the burning itch of the wounds on my chest and shoulder.

"Yes," she agreed as she followed me. "It feels safe here, like the farm."

I couldn't agree with her. Safety for me, like home, was where Mac was. I didn't think I'd ever feel safe again. I stared out over the water, remembering the nights when Corrine and I had stood on this point with Mac. If I closed my eyes I could feel him there with us, holding my hand and touching my hair. It was hard to believe that he was gone, that we'd never stand there with him again.

Eventually I realized that although the cold felt good to me, Corrine might not feel the same. When I looked at her, I could see her shivering. "We should probably go back," I suggested softly. My reluctance must have come through in my voice, because she told me we could stay longer if I wanted.

I turned back to the water, wishing that I never had to go back to the farmhouse. I'd turned over Mac's remains and told everyone exactly how Mac had died, the way I should have the first time around. There was nothing left for me to do but die missing him. With a sigh I told myself to stop thinking like that. Corrine would need help to get through Mac's funeral, and I had to be strong for her.

"We probably should go, they'll start to get worried if we're gone too long," I told her, turning and leading her back toward the path. "I think everyone expects me to slit my wrists or something."

I could tell by the look on Corrine's face that she didn't appreciate my lame attempt at a joke. "They are just concerned about you like I am. We are your family, that's our job."

"YOU ARE MY FAMILY, CORRINE," I TOLD HER FIRMLY. "THE ONLY FAMILY I HAVE. THEY ARE MAC'S FAMILY, AND YOURS. I DON'T BELONG HERE."

She stopped and looked at me in surprise. "Of course they are your family too," she declared forcefully. "How could you think otherwise? Grandfather always asks about you when I talk to him. And Grandmother, she'd never come right out and say it, but I know that she

worried about you and Mac all the time. They care for you just as much as they care about me.”

I couldn't tell her that she was wrong, that I'd never be family to the Brennans. Mac and I had never gotten around to getting married, and now we never would. Although his parents had always treated me well, I would always be an outsider.

I kissed her cheek and did what I could to pacify her. “I'm sorry, Corrine. I'm just a little out of it today. Let's go back so we don't worry them.”

We followed the path toward the house without saying much more. I knew she was worried about what I would do, but I still couldn't bring myself to lie to her, not even to make her feel better. I kept my mind focused on getting through the next few days and tried not to think about the empty future.

GOING UNDER

AND AS THE BAND DID PLAY, YOUR BODY I DID CRADLE
I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THAT SONG WOULD HAVE TO END
FUEL - SOLACE

I couldn't understand why everyone seemed a little relieved when we got back to the house. It was almost like they expected me to throw myself from the cliffs with Corrine right there next to me, watching me. They wouldn't leave me alone either, they kept trying to keep me involved in conversation when all I wanted to do was be alone to die in peace.

I'd done my duty bringing Mac to his family, there was nothing left for me, no goal, no reason to live. Even taking care of Corrine didn't have the urgency it once had. Mac was gone, and I was more alone than I'd ever been in my life, even in the middle of his grieving family.

Mac's funeral was scheduled for the next afternoon. We had all gone into town to pick out the casket and the headstone. I really didn't want to tag along, but they acted like it was expected of me. Since I didn't have a logical reason to argue with them, at least not one they want to hear, I went. I let them make most of the decisions, but I did speak up a time or two, on things I thought were important.

I wanted to sneak away when we got back to the house, but I'd barely made it to the bottom of the stairs when Siofra insisted I eat dinner with everyone else. Mac's friends from the Coven of Nerthis were there, and everyone wanted to give me their condolences. All I could do was thank them and try not to cry. After dinner someone handed me a short glass of whisky, but I quickly realized that if I didn't want to end up weeping all over everyone I needed to switch to coffee.

Corrine stuck pretty close to my side all afternoon and into the evening, trying to make sure that I wasn't too overwhelmed by everyone's sympathy. I know she meant well, but for real now, it wouldn't have mattered where I was or how many people bombarded me with their pity. Mac was gone, and I was alone.

Shortly after nine she suggested that we go off to bed and I was more than happy to go. As nice as everyone had been, I wasn't used to their brand of warm fuzzies, and it was getting on my nerves. Corrine and I shared a big bed in the guestroom upstairs, and though she fell off to sleep almost right away, I couldn't find the same escape to oblivion.

In my mind's eye I could look across the room and see Mac standing near the window, watching us. His familiar features were drawn with lines of worry almost as if he knew how hard all of this was for us. He seemed so real that I wanted to tell him to stop worrying, that we'd be fine, but I couldn't bring myself to lie, not even to this figment of my imagination.

"It wasn't supposed to be this way," I whispered softly, trying not to wake my daughter.

I watched him move across the room until he was right next to the bed looking down at me. I reached out but of course he wasn't really there for me to touch. When I made contact with where he should have been, the image faded away.

"You weren't supposed to leave me, Mac." Tears pooled in my eyes and it was an effort not to start crying again. "I can't do this without you."

There was no answer from the empty room but the sound of Corrine breathing next to me.

I tried to sleep, really, I did, but sleep was an elusive beast. After an hour of staring at the ceiling I got up and walked over to the window. I spent hours looking out at the countryside without really seeing anything. Finally I knew I couldn't take it any more. I got dressed in the dark and quietly made my way through the house and outside.

The night was cold, and the moon hidden behind the clouds, but I wanted darkness, I wanted a place to hide. Standing on the deck I looked toward the cemetery, but I didn't set my feet on the path that led there. There would be no comfort for me at the grave site, or in the parlor where the casket stood waiting for tomorrow's funeral. I looked out over the snow and wondered why the cold air on my skin felt warmer than the cold in my soul.

"Eliza," a woman's voice said softly from behind me. "You should be in bed."

I turned and looked into Siofra's dark eyes where I saw a pain that was a pale reflection of my own. Years ago Mac's sister had sacrificed a part of herself to avenge his mortal death, and a part of me as well. I wondered if she blamed me this time around.

Something of my thoughts might have shown on my face because she shook her head. "I know you'd have saved him if you could have," she said sadly.

I closed my eyes to hold back the tears that were threatening to consume me yet again.

"Come on now," she told me, her hands soft but strong on my shoulders. "He wouldn't want you to lose yourself in grief."

"Now you tell me," I whispered, pulling away and walking to the edge of the deck. I'd been lost the moment Mac had crumbled before my eyes.

She ignored my efforts to be alone and followed me to the rail. I stood stiff as she pulled me into her arms but after a moment I softened. Mac was her brother, and she'd lost him just as surely as I had. I put my arms around her, giving her what little comfort I could.

"I'm sorry, Siofra," I murmured. "It happened so quickly."

"Will you show me?" she asked hesitantly.

I pulled back and looked at her, wondering if she was strong enough to take watching her brother die. Immediately I knew better. Siofra was one of the strongest women I'd ever met.

She took my hand and I closed my eyes, thinking about what had happened in Edinburgh. The scene flashed through my mind making me want to scream once more.

I opened my eyes to see that tears streaked her face just as they did mine. She smiled through them, and squeezed my hand. "He was brave," she whispered brokenly, "and he died in battle."

We stood in silence on the deck, holding hands and mourning Mac for a long time. Eventually Siofra insisted that I go back upstairs and try to sleep. I went knowing that I wouldn't be able to, but hoping that she would at least get a little rest if she wasn't worrying about me.

I was back on the deck just after dawn when Cara and Stephen showed up. Stephen hugged me and offered me his condolences, but I refused to let myself cry again. It was going to be hard enough getting through the day without giving into grief that early.

Cara made breakfast while Stephen tried to talk to me about my future plans. He wouldn't listen when I tried to tell him I didn't have any, but somehow Cara managed to turn the conversation to other things. By the time Corrine came downstairs a little while later, I was more than happy to let her step into the limelight.

After breakfast she took me into town for something to wear to the funeral since neither of us had anything appropriate with us. Not that I cared about what I wore, or really anything else for that matter. Mac was gone.

By noon the house was crowded with people, which was both good and bad. It was good because none of them could really corner me with their pity or grief. It was bad because it was hard to find a minute alone. I tried to stay out of everyone's way, but it was almost impossible.

There were flowers everywhere, especially in the parlor. They covered nearly every surface, and their cloying smell was almost enough to gag me. One particular arrangement caught my attention because of its sheer size, but strangely enough there was no note.

Someone had found a large framed picture of Mac and placed it on top of the casket. Beside it were the flowers I'd asked Siofra to find. She told me later she'd gone for them herself, traveling half a world away to find daisies blooming this time of year.

I reached out and touched one of the petals as I felt the tears fall down my face. Mac had often given me daisies to remind me of the first time we'd made love. I'd planted dozens of them around the house in Salem. Laying a hand on the cool wood I thought about the dust that lay inside and had to bite my lip to stop from losing it right there in front of everyone. I didn't think anyone would understand another screaming fit.

Pulling myself together, I wiped my tears and looked around the room for Corrine. Thankfully she was occupied with Jared and Samantha. I hoped they'd help ease her grief since I knew I couldn't, not while mine was so fresh. I made my way upstairs for a jacket then outside to the back patio where I found myself alone at last.

The cold air felt good on my face, but it didn't help my nerves. I'd put on Mac's coat over my black dress hoping his familiar scent would sooth me, but I didn't know how I was going to get through the funeral without screaming or throwing myself on the casket. I put my hands in the jacket pockets and realized right away that they weren't empty.

I pulled out Mac's last pack of cigarettes and looked down at it for a long moment. I'd always wondered why he'd insisted on smoking when it did him no good, but he'd just called it habit and kept on doing it. Somehow I'd never picked the habit back up after Corrine was born, but right at that moment I could think of nothing better to do.

Lighting the cigarette was easy, but the first inhale was rough. It had been months since I'd had a cigarette, years since I smoked regularly, but the ache in my lungs didn't matter. Nothing did, not now. I ignored the discomfort to take another hit, and this time it wasn't so bad. I'd smoked my way through most of the cigarette when I heard a voice behind me.

"I didn't know you smoked," Jared said softly.

I glanced wryly at the cigarette in my hand. "I didn't. Found a pack in the pocket, and it sounded good. Want one?" I asked, offering him one.

"No thanks," he replied with a smile. "Corrine went upstairs with Samantha and I thought I'd step outside for a while. Lot's of people in there."

Turning back to the view, I nodded. "Way too many. Hard to breathe."

He stood next to me and looked up toward the cemetery that we'd be taking Mac to in an hour or so. "You never did like crowds much."

"No."

"Not much for talking either," he added softly.

I took one last hit on the cigarette and flung the butt out into the yard. "Not much to say, I guess."

Silence fell between us but I didn't mind. At least he didn't ask me how I was doing, or try to lie to me and tell me everything would be all right.

REQUIEM FOR LOST LOVE

PAIN AND MISERY MY ONLY FRIEND
I RAISE A TOAST AND I SALUTE THE END.
SALIVA - HOLDIN' ON

A couple of hours later we followed the casket up the hill to the cemetery. I was wearing my own coat this time, and walking close to Alaster and Noinen. The service at the house had been nice, but I couldn't remember much of what Stephen had said. I just wanted the day to be over so I could—hell, I don't know. Be elsewhere, I guess.

At the graveside we listened as Stephen spoke words of love and respect for his uncle. I couldn't tell you what he said, but I know they were nice, and I know that Mac would have liked them if he'd been there. I stood there in the icy wind and fought with my tears, but it was a battle I couldn't hope to win.

As tears fell down my cheeks I felt Glenn's strong arm go around my shoulders. To my surprise it helped just knowing he was there, that the whole family was there with me. Glenn's other arm was around his wife, and she was crying into his shoulder. Noinen stood crying next to a teary eyed Alaster, who held a sobbing Corrine in his arms. Even Cara was visibly upset.

I couldn't watch as they lowered the casket into the ground. I hid my face against Glenn's shoulder hoping to muffle the sounds of my sobs. I felt empty, hollow, alone, and I knew that nothing would ever fill the void he'd left behind.

Back at the house a big meal was waiting. I picked at the food, but didn't have much of an appetite. The only reason I ate at all was because Corrine kept giving me worried looks and I didn't want her pestering me to eat.

I let the hours and conversation that followed pass without paying much attention. I know that someone was always with me, that I always had a cup of coffee in my hand, and that once or twice I found myself on the patio, smoking cigarettes from Mac's last pack.

It wasn't until nine o'clock or so that I figured I could finally get away from the crowd without being rude. I went into the kitchen for a last cup of coffee to take up to bed with me, and found Noinen puttering around the kitchen, alone.

She gladly poured me a cup of coffee, and fussed over me for a few minutes before I was able to convince her I was tired. It was true enough, seeing as how I hadn't slept at all the night before. I was headed for the door when a thought occurred to me.

"Do you know what happened to the cards that came in?" I asked softly.

She hesitated for just a moment before answering, but it was enough for me to tell there was something in those cards that she didn't want me to see. "I do. Would you like to see them?"

"I'd like to see all of them, Noinen, even the one from the Tremere." When she quickly looked away, I knew I'd guessed right. "It's okay," I told her firmly. "I need to know what their stand is." She nodded reluctantly, and a few minutes later I was on my way upstairs with the bundle of envelopes in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other.

Once alone in the room I shared with Corrine, I sat on the edge of the bed and leafed through the sympathy notes. Lots of people had known Mac, and lots of them wanted to say how sorry they were that he was gone. I couldn't bring myself to read most of them, but I knew that someone would have to write thank you notes to all of those people.

The letter from the Tremere was near the bottom of the stack on heavy cream paper. My name was written on the front of the folded sheet in Elvira's elegant script. Turning it over I

saw that the wax seal was still intact, but that didn't mean much in a house full of magi. They could have read the letter without opening it, or broken the seal and repaired it very easily. With a quick movement of my thumb I broke the seal and opened the note.

Eliza.
You have our deepest sympathies for your loss. Cormac was a valuable member of our family and he will be missed. If there is anything we can do to help you during this difficult time, please don't hesitate to call. You are still a part of our family, and once you return home we will do our best to take care of your needs. You don't have to be alone, now or ever again.
Elvira Van Dorn
Ford Radek

The words were comforting on the surface, but I knew that beneath those pretty words was an order to return to Salem. They wanted me to come back to them, and they weren't going to take no for an answer. I walked to the window and stared out at the snow covered ground wondering what to do now.

It would be so much easier to just go back to Salem, to the bedroom that Mac and I had shared. I could lie on our bed and die there, and wake up with no memory of the empty ache that filled my chest. I could forget that I'd ever loved him, let my worries and pain disappear forever.

I jumped when I felt arms go around me from behind.

"Eliza? Are you okay?"

At the sound of Corrine's voice I relaxed a little. I heard the paper in my hand crumple as I wiped the tears I'd just noticed from my face. "Yeah," I told her. "I just wanted a few minutes alone."

"What did they say?" she asked softly.

"Who?" When she reached down and touched the hand that still clutched the note, I realized that she knew the letter was from the Tremere. "They're sending their sympathies," I said dryly. "They want—" I stopped and finished crumpling the note into a ball. "They offered to help if I needed it."

She moved to one side so she could see my face. "Help you with what?"

"Doesn't matter," I told her with a shrug. "The flowers were nice, though."

"Eliza," she said softly, "you don't have to shelter me from them anymore. Are they ordering you to come back or something?" Her voice was more than a little anxious.

"No, luv," I lied softly. "More like a reminder of where they think I belong." I knew she wouldn't take my word for it so I held the crumpled note out to her hoping she wouldn't see the command written between the lines.

She took a moment to read the note before looking up at me. "Could you walk away if you wanted?"

"I could try." I hugged my stomach and looked back out the window. "I can't imagine they'd be happy to let me go. Not many freaks like me out there. If I don't go back I'll be running for a long time." I could do it, though. I'd run before, from my mother, from Glenn, from myself.

"You aren't a freak," she scolded. "If you are then so am I and I don't feel like a freak." She put her arms around me again. "I'm very lucky for the life I have and that is because of you."

I turned in her arms and pulled her closer, putting my head on her shoulder to hide my tears. "You're human, luv, just like Mac was," I whispered. "I've done what I could to take care of you, to make sure you had the chance to live like he should have. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy, and safe."

"I am safe," she assured me. "I want you to be safe, too." I could almost hear the wheels in her head turning as she took a minute to think. "I don't think you should go back."

"I don't know," I said softly. I didn't know what I'd do if the Tremere tried to use Corrine as leverage against me again. "I've got a lot to think about, I'm not ready to make any decisions yet."

"Well, always remember that I am here for you," she promised, "and whatever you decide I will back you one hundred percent."

"I know, sweetheart." I pulled back and tried to smile for her. "I think I'm going to go to bed now. You don't have to stay with me, not unless you want to." I really wasn't tired, but then I really wasn't ready to talk about the future, not yet.

She nodded as if she understood. "I'll stay with you. I just want to go say goodnight to everyone."

"All right, take your time." I wanted a few minutes alone anyway, just to get hold of myself. While she went back downstairs, I got ready for bed, and by the time she came back I was pretending to be asleep.

INSIDE OF THIS SICKNESS

CRAWLING IN MY SKIN

THESE WOUNDS THEY WILL NOT HEAL

LINKIN PARK - CRAWLING

It wasn't until our last day in Ireland when everyone but family had left that things started to settle down. I still didn't know what I was going to do about the future. I knew that if I went back to Salem, the Tremere would keep me under lock and key until they figured out a way to control me, that or they'd kill me and I'd be one of them for real this time. As much as I wanted to forget the pain of losing Mac, I wasn't quite sure I was ready to become a monster.

As it turned out, everyone expected me to go home with Glenn and Siofra, so that's what I did. Once back in Nashville I spent most of my time in the room I'd shared with Corrine. The Johnson house was full of people, loud and full of life despite the grieving that Glenn and Siofra were going through, and I couldn't stand it. Apparently Siofra couldn't either. Two days after returning she opened a gateway and took Ian and me through it.

I couldn't really make myself care where we were going, but when I realized where we were, I asked her to send me back to Nashville. Then I begged her to send me back. The last place I wanted to be was the cabin where Mac and I had first made love. She refused, claiming the gateway had worn her out.

That first day I walked for hours, doing my best to stay away from places that reminded me of my lost lover. I walked down the drive to the main road thinking that keeping to civilization would do the trick. I was wrong. About a mile from the cabin I came across a clearing where someone had built a large home. The setting looked eerily familiar, but it took me several minutes to realize that it had been built where once daisies had bloomed.

I suppose in my mind the clearing had taken on a sacredness I was sure somehow no one else would dare taint. To find it ruined cut nearly as bad as Mac's death. I sat down just inside the tree line that surrounded the ruined meadow and cried, hugging my knees to my chest.

When I returned to the cabin, I retreated into my bedroom. I stayed there for days, getting up only when nature demanded I use the bathroom. Food didn't interest me, and I pretended sleep every time Siofra knocked on the door.

Alone in my room I could pretend that nothing was wrong, that Mac hadn't died, that we would always be together. I spend hours building a fantasy life in my mind full of children and puppies and laughter. I might have stayed there forever had Siofra not taken matters into her own hands.

She opened the locked door with a bit of magic and a moment later I found myself on the floor. I stayed there for a minute, trying to understand what had happened. I looked up to see Siofra standing near the bed, the sheets in her hand.

"That's enough, Eliza," she said sternly.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I demanded wearily. I didn't want to fight with her, I just wanted to lie back down and sleep.

"If you're so sure you want to die, there are easier ways to do it than starving yourself." She crossed her arms over her chest, but held on to the sheets.

"I'm not starving myself," I replied coolly, tugging on the edge of the sheets so I could lay back down on them. The movement pulled against the wounds on my chest and I gasped.

Siofra didn't miss my pain. "Why don't you heal them?"

"I can't," I growled irritably.

"Have you tried?" she shot back. "Or do you want that pain to punish you for living when Mac died? Heal them."

I was just angry enough to ignore the voice in the back of my head that tried to warn me. Sending blood to the injured area was easy, keeping my feet afterward was not. I fell to my knees clutching my stomach, fighting the waves of nausea that crashed over me. It was a losing battle.

Siofra swept my hair back and kept it out of the way as the sickness took over. When it was done, she wiped my mouth and held me until the shaking subsided.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked softly.

"Tell you what?" I pulled away and crawled toward the bed, craving its softness. "It was just something I ate."

"You haven't eaten in days," she countered. "Besides, I can feel the infection inside of you."

"It's not an infection," I argued as I climbed onto the bare mattress and curling into a ball. "I'm never sick. It'll go away."

"What if it doesn't?"

I closed my eyes to hide the pity in hers. "Does it matter?"

"Yeah, it matters."

I looked at her in surprise. "Why? I wouldn't think you'd give a damn what happens to me."

"Eliza, of course I care about you." She shook her head sadly. "What if something's seriously wrong with you? Wouldn't you want to get it fixed? Have somebody look at it before it kills you?"

I didn't bother to answer her. After a while she gave up and went away, leaving me shivering and alone. I got up and made the bed carefully, then pulled out the knife I'd put between the mattresses.

Laying the knife on the bed I sat back against the pillows, studying the razor sharp edge that gleamed in the sunlight like a silver jewel. Mac had bought me the knife shortly after I'd become his ghoul to replace the one I'd had to give up. The long blade was sharp, almost too sharp. It would be so easy to lay open my veins with it.

Dying might not fix the problem I was having with the blood, but it would certainly solve the difficulty I was having dealing with Mac's death. My mortal life would be over, but I'd rise a vampire with no memories of Mac to haunt me. It might not be exactly what Mac had intended when he'd done the spell, but he wasn't here anymore. If he were, I sure as hell wouldn't be contemplating suicide.

I picked up the knife and laid the flat of the blade on my wrist. It was cool against my skin, and I knew it would be a simple thing to turn it a little and let the blade sink into my flesh. As sharp as it was, I'd barely feel it slice through flesh and veins. My blood would flow, staining the bed, releasing me from this misery.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to not remember anything. I'd seen the way the bloodline's amnesia worked when Mac had embraced James Price. I knew it would be confusing and difficult to deal with, but it couldn't possibly be as difficult as the shit I was dealing with now.

Then I remembered what James had been like right after Mac had turned him. He'd been lost, confused, and hungry. If I woke a vampire in this cabin with no memories of his family,

I'd most certainly think of them as my first meal. Ian and Siofra would die or I'd meet final death here in the wilds of North Carolina.

Of course there was the fact that Corrine would be devastated to lose both Mac and me in such a short time. It wasn't fair to expect her to be okay with my suicide. As much as she swore that she could take care of herself, a part of her would always need me to look after her.

I could die and forget my mortal torment, or go on feeling the pain of Mac's loss. I knew from experience I'd never completely get over his death, but I also knew that it was possible for me to survive it.

In a single violent motion I threw the knife across the room. It sank into the trim around the doorway with a resounding thunk, almost drowning out the soft knock on the door. A moment later the door swung open and Glenn stood in the doorway, staring at the knife that was still quivering from the force of my throw.

"I wanted to see how you were doing," he said softly as he reached out to pry the knife from the wood. I wasn't surprised he was at the cabin, I'd heard his voice a few times at the door of the bedroom over the last few days.

"Five by five," I replied, my voice flat even to my ears.

He looked down at the knife in his hands. "I'm not sure you are." Closing the door, he walked across the room toward me. When I held out my hand for the knife, he just shook his head.

I smiled wryly. "Afraid I'll cut my finger?"

"I'm afraid you'll cut your wrist," he stated bluntly. "Maybe you should put away your weapons for now, you're safe here."

My laugh was husky, almost hoarse. "Am I, Glenn?" I pondered. "Hard to tell, sometimes." When I reached for the knife he tried to move it beyond my grasp, but I was too fast for him. I held onto the hilt tightly and looked up at him. "I think I'll keep my weapons. Never know when I'll need them."

The bed dipped a bit when he sat down on the edge. "Are you okay, really?"

"No, I don't think so," I said honestly. How could I be, when I'd never see Mac again, never hold him in my arms? "It doesn't work without him, Glenn. Never did."

"I know this is hard for you, Eliza," he replied gently. "I know it's hard to believe right now, but it will get better."

Now he was gonna try to talk to me, tell me how my life wasn't over, how I could find something else to live for, how I still had Corrine. I didn't want to hear it. Mac had been my everything, and he was gone.

"Don't," I warned him softly. "Just save the pep talk, will you? I know what it's like, mourning him. I've done this before." I slid off the bed and walked over to the window, looking out on the snow covered mountain that was as cold as I felt. "It doesn't get better, it never fades. The pain just sits there and it never goes away."

"Do you think death will take away the pain?" he asked.

"I know it will." I closed my eyes, remembering what it was like to drink Mac's blood, to have him drink mine. It hurt so much to know that I'd never know that feeling again, never touch his cool skin, never feel my blood warming his body.

"Is that what you want?"

I wasn't sure how to answer him. Of course I wanted death to take the pain away, but I didn't want to hurt Corrine any more than she'd been hurt already.

"I can't heal the wounds, Glenn," I said rather than answering his question. "They're kinda like those from a werewolf, slow to heal unless I use a lot of blood."

"But you can't use blood cause it makes you sick," he said softly.

"Yeah." I looked down at the knife in my hand, then laid it slowly on the nearby dresser and turned to face him. "It'll take weeks for them to get better, maybe months. If the Tremere find me before they heal, I won't be able to fight them off."

"May I try?" he asked.

"I don't want anyone to die because I can't fight." I went back to the bed and sat down next to him. "I'd like you to see what you can do."

When he was done I was tired, but my wounds were healed. I don't know what Glenn did, but somehow he cleaned the infection from my system so I could use blood again. It felt good, the best anything had since Mac had crumbled to dust in front of me.

A few hours later we went back to Nashville. I spent a lot of time with Ian and Siofra, and a lot of time sitting in their garden feeling the sun on my face. I still missed Mac, but I knew I couldn't hide away forever. I still had a choice to make about the Tremere and my future.

REMINDEERS

I DON'T WANT TO BE LONELY
I DON'T WANT TO BE SCARED
SHERYL CROW - SAFE AND SOUND

I felt the vampire when she walked into the room, a warning in the tingling at the base of my spine. The early warning system had always been as much a part of me as breathing and sleeping, but I hadn't really understood it until I'd run away from home and been attacked a few times. Something about my blood attracts vampires. Mac had told me it was the smell, but whatever it was, they all wanted to bite me. Just because I knew this vamp didn't mean that she'd be any different.

Glenn and Siofra had convinced me that I needed to start going out, to try and go on living again. Since they'd been so nice to me, I agreed to give it a try, and the three of us had gone out for a movie. Maybe we should have chosen an afternoon matinee rather than the evening show we'd chosen to see.

Sarah Hamilton moved to the sink next to me and started brushing her hair. I watched her in the mirror, fairly certain that she wouldn't attack me here in the movie theater bathroom. I wasn't sure what I'd do if she did. We hadn't exactly become friends while I'd worked for the Tremere, but I didn't really want to kill her for doing her job.

"We've been looking for you, Eliza," she said softly. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine," I replied as calmly as I could while I dried my hands. "Surprised to see you in Nashville."

"You know why I'm here. We thought it would be better if you talked to someone you trusted," she explained as she touched up her lipstick. "James is busy protecting the city, so Micky and I came here."

"I can't imagine you came just to check up on me." She was between me and the door, or I might have made a run for it. If I had to fight her I would, but I wanted a little space between us first so I took a step back. It would give me more time to react, especially if she decided to pull the gun she was wearing under her left arm.

"We are sorry for your loss." She sounded sincere, sad even.

I closed my eyes, pushing the pain down, trying to keep it manageable. It was tough, but somehow I did it. Now was not the time to fall apart.

"We know this time is particularly difficult for you, Eliza," she soothed, putting away her lipstick and turning to look at me. "We want you to come home, come back to Salem."

"Mac's gone," I said bluntly, holding on to my composure by mere threads of self-control. "The contract is toast."

"The contract, yes," she agreed. "But you are still a Tremere ghoul, Eliza. We're your family; we can take care of you."

"I'm not a ghoul anymore, Sarah," I corrected her. "My master's dead."

"But you have his blood inside you still, Eliza," she replied rationally. "How will you replace it now that he's gone? We will make sure you have all that you need."

I didn't answer, I couldn't. My mind was spinning. The stash of vitae in my boot wouldn't last long. If I was badly injured, I would face the choice of being laid up for a while or using what was left. Going back to them I wouldn't have to worry about replacing my reserve. It wouldn't be the same as Mac's Kindred blood, but it would be gotten freely, without killing for it. The only thing I didn't know was if I could force myself to drink from anyone else.

Of course, there was also the fact that going back to the Tremere would mean handing over my will again, not to the ties of blood, but to a vamp, one I wouldn't trust the way I'd trusted Mac. This time they were sure to find out the blood didn't bond me as it did normal humans.

"Several Tremere have offered to take you on, my dear," she said when I was silent. "James would welcome you with open arms. Micky, Alden, even Elvira would be happy to have you serve them. You could have your pick of masters, Eliza. Even Ford, if that was your wish."

That last offer was the most surprising, and the most tempting. Ford was powerful enough to take care of me, he would make sure that no one considered me fair game, and I was pretty sure he'd help me protect Corrine. Still, I wasn't fool enough to think he'd never feed from me and I didn't know if I could handle his teeth in my veins.

When Mac had fed from me, I'd felt peace, and love, and passion. I'd been bitten by other vampires, but known only pain from their 'kiss'. I didn't know if I could go through that pain again, not willingly.

"We can take care of you, my dear," she continued, her voice soft and comforting. "Come home to us, to your family. We can see to it that you have everything you need."

"No, you can't," I whispered fiercely. "You can't bring him back."

"No one can, Eliza," she replied logically. "No one can replace him in your life, but without someone to look after you, there will always be a need inside of you. You know that, don't you? We can fill that need, that hunger."

My eyes filled with tears and I had to blink them away. Before Mac had come back, I'd been firm in my belief that vampires were evil, that they caused only pain, that drinking their blood would control me. I'd been wrong about most of my beliefs, but I wasn't sure how much I could trust Mac's clan now that he wasn't around to protect me.

What surprised me was how badly I wanted to trust them, how much I wanted someone to take care of me. It wasn't about the blood, not really. It was more about me not knowing what to do with myself or the rest of my life. The clan would give me purpose again, something to live for, maybe even die for.

I'm not sure what I'd have said if Siofra hadn't come into the bathroom just then. Sarah's back was to the door so she didn't see the mage, but Siofra's presence was enough to clear my head.

"Please tell Lord Radek and the prince that I appreciate the clan's offer and all," I said slowly, trying to be as polite as I could manage, "but I'm not ready to make my mind up about anything just yet. When I am ready, I'll let you know."

I'm sure her smile was meant to be an understanding one, but I could see that she didn't like my answer. "Do you need anything, Eliza? Money? A place to stay? We can help you."

"No, I'm fine," I told her, edging around her for the door.

Sarah noticed Siofra at last and smiled coolly in her direction. To my surprise, she let us go without another word. I nearly stopped when I saw Micky in the lobby watching us, but Siofra took my arm and led me back into the theater.

We went back to watch the rest of movie, but the night was ruined. I kept expecting to see the Tremere attacking to try and drag me back to Salem whether I wanted to go or not. My mood wasn't the only black one. By the time we got back to the house, Siofra was fuming.

"I can't believe their nerve," she growled as she dropped her purse on the table.

"I'm actually surprised they've waited this long to contact her," Glenn told her as he sat down.

"Not that they can get to me here," I reminded him. The house was warded against vampires and ghouls; in fact I had to be very careful not to touch any outside doors or windows. I'd been burned before trying to get into the house.

"Did she think she could bribe you into coming back?" Siofra demanded as she paced the kitchen, fuming.

I sat down across from Glenn and smiled wryly. "They can't scare me into coming back." Siofra turned to look at me curiously. "You're not taking this very seriously."

"Oh, it's serious, I know," I admitted. "I knew they'd show up sooner or later. I'm just surprised they didn't take me kicking and screaming no matter what I said."

Glenn reached across the table and covered my hand with his. "We wouldn't have let that happen, not against your will."

"I know." I let myself take comfort from his touch for just a moment before smiling sadly and pulling away. "I need to make up my mind, don't I? Maybe I should have just gone with them."

"No," Siofra insisted firmly. "You don't know what they'll do to you now without—"

Without Mac to protect me. She wasn't saying anything I hadn't already thought of, but then again, "I don't have very many choices, do I?" I demanded. "They're never going to stop looking for me. I can't protect Corrine on the run. If I go back—"

"If you go back, they'll ghoull you to someone else, Eliza," Glenn reminded me.

"They'll try," I agreed. "The blood doesn't screw me like it does most people."

"You don't think they'll find that out?" Siofra asked, coming to sit down next to me.

"I'm sure they will." Mac had been very adamant that no one perform the Blood Walk on me, a ritual that revealed blood bonds, but with him gone that would most likely be the first thing they did.

"Then they'll kill you," Glenn stated.

"And I'll forget everything, Glenn," I told him, trying not to focus on what a relief that would be, even if it meant becoming a vampire. "It's the only way I'll ever stop missing him."

"You'd be dead, Eliza," he warned me. "You'd be—a vampire?" I tried to block my thoughts but it was too late, he was reading my mind. "Why would you—?" He stood quickly, his chair falling to the floor as he stepped back from the table. "Why would you let him do that to you, Eliza?" he demanded, his dark eyes flashing with fury. "Bad enough that you shared blood with him, but—"

I looked up at him angrily. "Get the fuck out of my mind, Glenn," I growled. "What happened between Mac and me is none of your damned business. He had his reasons for doing it. If I had died that night in Edinburgh instead of Mac, we'd still be together."

"What are you talking about?" Siofra asked, confused at the turn of our conversation.

"Stop acting like he forced me to be his puppy," I demanded, ignoring her for the moment. "I loved him. I trusted him. I'd have done anything he asked me to do, and I'll never regret a moment we had together, not one single moment."

"Is that why you haven't slit your wrists, Eliza?" he challenged. "Because you know we'd destroy you if you woke up in this house one of them?"

Siofra looked up at her husband warningly, and I took the moment to bring my temper under control. "I wouldn't do that to you, Glenn, and you know it, but shit happens. What if I died, for whatever reason, and woke up in a blood frenzy? Maybe it's best if I do go back to them, they'll know how to cure it or kill me trying."

"How would you be a vampire if you're dead?" Siofra asked softly.

"The same way Joseph woke up a vampire after the demon killed him," I replied as calmly as I could. "Mac did a ritual on me, some curse. He said that even if something happened to me, we'd still be together. I'd lose my memory because of his blood, but being with him would bring it back. If they kill me, Mac's blood will do its thing and I won't remember how—" How much I loved him, missed him, needed to be with him. God, I was so pathetic. "Sounds like a bargain to me."

"But that's not what you want," she replied quickly.

"Why not?" I demanded as I fought not to break down crying, or to hit something in frustration. "You have no idea what this is like, how much I miss him, how much it hurts, every second. I'd love to close my eyes and forget about it, and damn the consequences."

"You can't do that," she protested.

I shook my head and said the only honest thing that I could. "Not here, I can't."

"Corrine would be devastated," Glenn said softly as he sat back down at the table.

"I know." I looked down at the tablecloth and sighed. "She's the only reason I haven't."

Silence filled the room for long minutes. Finally, Siofra reached out and touched my hand. "What are you going to do?"

I couldn't give her an answer mostly because I didn't have one, not yet.

A MIDNIGHT TOAST

RAISING MY GLASS, I SING A TOAST TO THE MIDNIGHT SKY
I WONDER WHY THE STARS DON'T SEEM TO GUIDE ME
BBMAK - GHOST OF YOU AND ME

We went to Ireland for Christmas. I stepped out of the gateway and moved aside to let Glenn come through after me. I returned Noinen's welcoming hug, and did the same for Alaster, but all the while I felt like an imposter. As much as this was Mac's family, I didn't belong here with them.

Dinner was good, but I didn't eat much of it. I could see the love that bonded these people together and felt even more out of place than I had before. I wasn't a part of this family, I didn't belong, and I never would.

Lying in bed waiting restlessly for sleep that wouldn't come, I got to thinking that maybe I should go back to the Tremere. I couldn't expect Glenn and Siofra to protect me forever, and I couldn't face a life on the road never knowing if Corrine needed me. In Salem I'd be able to keep an eye on her, protect her, at least for a little while, for as long as I could remember her.

The early hours of the morning found me making my way to the cemetery on the hill behind the house. It was a dark night but I didn't need lights to make my way up the path. The white picket fence that surrounded the family graveyard shone like a beacon for me in the darkness, and I'd visited the place at night with Mac enough to be able to find Angus' grave without even trying.

Ignoring the cold wind, I stood there staring down at the newly placed headstone and bare earth that marked Mac's final resting place next to his brother. I ran my fingers over the letters as I whispered them softly. "Cormac Alaster Brennan, Dream Guardian, Beloved."

I knelt in the dirt and lifted the bottle that I'd brought with me for a long drink. The whisky burned going down much like Kindred blood, but it tasted much, much worse. It didn't feel the same in my stomach either, reminding me that I'd barely eaten all day. Food wouldn't fill the hole inside of me, any more than the whisky would. I didn't know if I was trying to make myself feel better, or self-destruct.

"Why didn't you take me with you, Mac?" I whispered as I wiped my tears away. "We were supposed to be together, remember? Forever. Or did you forget, again?" I stopped myself before I could say more along those lines. It hadn't been Mac's fault that he'd forgotten everything at his embrace twenty years ago, and it wasn't his fault that the demon had killed him.

"Damn you, Mac," I whispered fiercely. The next drink didn't burn quite so much going down. "You should have let me take on the demon. If it'd killed me, you'd have been there when I woke up Kindred. I should have made you listen to me." After another long pull on the bottle, I turned and sat with my back against the cold stone. "You never listened to me."

Closing my eyes I could almost feel him there with me, and it pissed me off. I didn't want to 'almost' feel him, I wanted him to be there, to hold me and tell me everything was all right and that he would never leave me again.

"It should have been me," I said angrily. "You could have handled me dying, I can't do this." It was no good yelling at him, he wasn't there to argue back. Lifting the bottle to my mouth once more, I didn't even try to stop the tears from falling.

When I opened my eyes I could practically see him there in front of me, a pale transparent figure in the moonlight. "It should have been me," I told the image of my lover. "You would have been strong, but I'm not, Mac. I'm weak, and I need you. I can't do this without you."

The specter reached toward me, but I closed my eyes to block the sight. For his image to be so clear to me, the whisky must have been driving me over the edge. I took another long drink hoping that it would drive the vision of my dead lover from my sight. When I opened my eyes again, he was gone.

I lit a cigarette and laid my head back against the headstone, but I had to bite my lip to stop from begging him to come back. After a while things started numbing out from the whisky, and for that I was damn grateful. It was hard enough thinking about turning myself over to the Tremere without wondering what Mac would have said about it.

"I'm not surprised to find you here," I heard a woman's voice say.

I looked my head to see Cara entering the cemetery. Her movements were silent but sure in the darkness as if she was used to visiting the graveyard in the dead of night. She probably was since her husband was buried there, right next to Mac.

"Couldn't sleep," I admitted, flicking the remains of the cigarette away and watching the glow arc through the darkness into a patch of snow. "Every time I close my eyes..."

"You see it all over again, don't you?" she asked kindly as she joined me near the headstones of our dead men. "It took a long time for me to stop seeing Angus die every time I closed my eyes."

"Sometimes I still dream about that night in Baltimore," I admitted, looking up at the cold sky and seeing once again Dougal's teeth in my lover's throat. That vision was quickly replaced by one of Mac crumbling to dust, the fangs he'd always kept hidden from me bared in his final moments.

"Sometimes I can feel Angus when I come up here," she said sadly. "It's been almost two years and I'm sure his spirit has moved on by now, but sometimes I swear that if I just turn fast enough, I'll see him."

I closed my eyes against the wave of longing that swept over me. I tried to speak, but I couldn't form the words past the knot of pain in my throat. In the end I simply raised the bottle for another drink.

She reached down and traced the words on Angus' headstone. "Do you think they know how much we miss them?" she wondered aloud. "Do you think they care?"

"I don't know," I replied softly, wrapping my arms around my knees. The bottle was cold in my hands, but the fact that I could feel it meant I could still feel something. "Maybe they do. Doesn't really matter if they do or not, you know? They're still gone. We're still alone."

Cara looked at me in surprise. "We're not alone, Eliza," she protested. "We have our children, and the family will always look after us."

"I don't need looking after," I said in a voice that sounded tired even to my own ears. "Corrine has her own life now, and I don't have any family left, not since I killed Kate." My smile was a painful grimace. "Unless you count the Tremere."

"You're wrong," she told me sternly as she watched me take another long drink. "We're your family, whether you want us to be or not."

The whisky made it a little easier to smile. "It's a nice thought, Cara, but we both know I don't belong here. Trouble finds me no matter where I go. It would be best for everyone if I left."

"Maybe," she argued as she sat down on the cold ground and leaned back against Angus' headstone. "But then again, maybe not. You don't have anywhere to go, Eliza, not unless you go back to the Tremere. Is that what you're planning on doing?"

"I don't know." I shook my head and looked down. "Mac was different. I'm not sure I'll be able to handle anyone else telling me what to do."

She studied my face in the darkness and I wondered how much she could see of my expression. "You loved him."

"Yes," I agreed as I passed her the bottle of whisky.

"If you don't go back to the Tremere, they'll come looking for you," she reminded me.

"They already have." I stifled a sad sigh. "If I don't go back I won't be able to look after Corrine anymore."

"Sure you will, and we'll help you. That's what families do, help each other." She took a long pull before on the bottle and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand as she gave the bottle back. "Besides, what other choice do you have?"

"I can just leave," I said softly, voicing the thought that had been in my head since I'd decided not to join Mac in the ground. "Just walk away and not look back." I wondered if I could just walk away from Corrine, I'd never been able to before.

"You'd be alone," she reminded me. "No one to count on, no one to talk to."

"I lived on the run for years before I met Glenn," I told her. "I can stay off their radar."

She smiled grimly. "Eliza, I can smell the difference in your blood, and I'm not a vampire. I'm sure that any of them within a mile of you will be smelling it too." Her smile became warmer, and to my surprise she touched my hand. "Let us take care of you, let us be your family."

And just that suddenly I knew she was right. The first day I'd met him Alaster had said he considered me his daughter-in-law, and neither he nor his wife had ever behaved differently. Mac's family had always treated me as one of them, I was the one who had insisted on keeping myself separate. Now I realized there was no need for it, there never had been.

I felt some of the tension in my gut give way. Mac was never coming back, but that didn't mean I was alone. It didn't matter if I moved to Ireland, stayed in Nashville, or went anywhere else; I had people I could count on, people I could trust, family.

"To family," I said as I lifted the bottle to drink. Cara echoed my toast when I gave her the bottle, then she turned to Angus' grave. Tilting the bottle she poured half of what little remained out onto the dirt. "*Grá mo chroí, cronaím thú,*" she said softly. I wasn't surprised to see tears on her face.

When she gave the bottle back to me, I emptied it on the still bare earth behind Mac's headstone. I'm not good with words, and I couldn't think of anything fancy to say, so I just whispered, "I miss you," as I felt my own tears fall.

Cara and I hugged before leaving the graveyard and going back to our beds. I slept better that night than I had since before Mac had died, although I can't say whether it was from the whisky or the talk we'd had in the moonlight.

WHERE MEMORIES DWELL

WON'T DO NO GOOD TO HOLD NO SEANCE
WHAT'S GONE IS GONE AND YOU CAN'T BRING IT BACK AROUND
FIONA APPLE - CARTOON

The next day was Christmas, but we all agreed that we'd wait until Corrine came a few days later to open presents. I was glad for the delay, because there was something I needed to do, now that I'd made my mind up not to go back to the Tremere, something I'd need Glenn and Siofra's help with.

A few hours before Corrine was scheduled to join the family in Galway, a few of us took a trip to Salem. We walked through a portal into the kitchen about an hour after dawn hoping that Eddie hadn't taken up residence in the house but ready for him if he had. Thankfully the house was quiet and had an empty feel to it that could only come from no one being home. No one alive anyway, I was fully aware that James was sleeping in his bedroom upstairs.

I'd gone over the layout of the house with the others and come up with a list of things I wanted to take from the house I'd once shared with Mac. Mostly it was weapons and photographs, but there were some clothes and keepsakes I wanted to get too, and the two cars and Mac's motorcycle. Everyone took part of the list and went separate ways through the house to gather what I needed.

I stood in the kitchen for a moment looking out over the garden I'd spent the last year working so hard on. I'd never see the tulips sprout, or watch the lilacs or daisies bloom. The herbs would go unharvested, and in a few years the garden would return to the sorry condition it had been in when we'd moved into the house.

Staring out at the back yard I remembered working there last fall, and how Eddie had shown up one night just before sundown. I hadn't been happy to see him, and when he told me I owed him because I'd killed his master, I'd gotten mad.

"I don't owe you a damn thing," I growled. "I was trying to get away from Kate when she found me in Charleston. I told you she was bad news, but you wouldn't listen to me. You owe me for setting you free."

"Free to do what, die?" he demanded. "Yeah, thanks a lot."

His death wasn't my concern. "Gotta be better than being a slave."

"Looked to me like that's right where you are, sweetheart," he grinned coldly. "Maybe I should return the favor."

I grabbed him by the front of his shirt and lifted him off his feet, the point of my spade in his throat. "Don't even think about it, Eddie," I warned him harshly. "You touch him and I'll cut off your head just like I did Kate's, got it?" His eyes showed fear, but he didn't fight me. If he had, I might have killed him then and there.

A part of me wished I hadn't been so hard on him, wished I hadn't argued with Mac about taking Eddie on as a ghoul. I'd thought Eddie would be bad news, but if it hadn't been for him, I'd still be with the Tremere.

Shaking my head to clear it of the memories I quickly gathered what few things I wanted from the room and moved on, heading upstairs. Once there I paused outside of Jimmy's room and laid a hand on his door. I wanted to open it for one last look at Mac's child, but I knew I didn't dare risk waking him. Shaking my head, I remembered the night he'd become Tremere, and the danger we'd been in before Mac had found us.

"Why did you try to help me?" Jimmy demanded, breathing hard and leaning on the cabinet we'd pushed against the door of the boat house to keep the Brujah out.

"Mac tried to tell you, Jimmy," I told him as I looked around for something we could use for weapons. "We're trying to make sure you don't get yourself dead."

"Cormac?" he asked. When I nodded, he looked at the cabinet we'd wedged against the window. The Brujah were outside yelling for us to let them in, but we were safe, at least for the moment. "This isn't going to last for long."

I started clawing through a pile of discarded junk, searching for something wooden we could use for stakes. "It only has to last until Mac finds us."

"And just how in the hell is he going to do that?" he demanded.

"He will," I said firmly.

And he had. Mac had found us and we'd killed the bad guys, but it had been too late for Jimmy to walk away. The prince had thought that he was too close to the truth, and had ordered Mac to embrace him. Jimmy hadn't liked the idea, but he wasn't exactly given a choice. I'd slipped out of the room before the deed was done, and afterward I'd had a hard time getting used to the new vamp in our household.

"Did you know me, before?" James asked one night shortly after his embrace.

"I did," I admitted, knowing he couldn't remember his past.

"Did you like me, before?" He looked as if he expected me to say no, and his expression pulled at my heart strings.

"I liked you, Jimmy," I whispered with a sigh as I rested my forehead on the cool wood. It had taken me time to get over his vampirism, but he was Mac's childe, which in some dark and twisted way made him my son. It hurt to think I'd never get to see him again without being afraid that he'd try to capture or kill me. If it came down to him or me, I didn't know what I'd do. Hurting him wouldn't quite be like hurting Corrine, but it would be close enough to make me hesitate.

Knowing I didn't have a long time to linger, I turned away and opened the door of the room that Mac and I had shared. The sight of the neatly made bed made my hands shake, and for a moment I didn't think I could do it, didn't think I could walk into that room. Finally I took a deep breath and took the first step inside.

It didn't take long to pull the suitcases from under the bed and fill it with my clothes. I didn't take everything; I didn't see where I'd need the formal gowns and fancy shoes Mac had insisted I buy. A few of Mac's shirts joined my clothes in the first suitcase then I started working on filling the second one with weapons.

After closing both suitcases, I sat down beside them on the bed for one last look around. Abruptly I realized that I could still smell Mac on the sheets. I closed my eyes, remembering the last time we'd lain on them together, still tangled together from our lovemaking.

My heart was still pounding when Mac ran a finger down the side of my neck, feeling the skin slick with sweat.

"It's not fair that you don't sweat anymore," I whispered softly.

"I sweat blood," he reminded me with a wry smile. "Besides, I like the way you sweat,"

"Right, I stink like a pig."

"No, luv," he told me, his eyes warm with hunger. "You smell good, very good."

"That's what all the big bad vamps tell me," I teased him as I turned my head and offered him my throat. "Are you a big bad vamp?"

"I'm one of the good ones," he said just before I felt the sting of his teeth in my flesh.

My hands clenched at the blanket and I bit my lip until it bled. I had to stop thinking of Mac or I'd be here all day, and we didn't have time for this little walk down memory lane. We needed to gather everything I needed and get out of there before someone caught us.

I grabbed the suitcases and went down the hall to Mac's study to make sure that Glenn had boxed up all of Mac's occult books. As an afterthought I told him to grab the laptop in its case. I didn't really know how to use it, but maybe I could learn.

Once I was sure we had gotten everything, I took one last walk through the downstairs before pausing in the kitchen to leave a note I'd written for James. It was the only way I could say goodbye to him.

JAMES,

I'D HAVE COME WHEN YOU WERE AWAKE, BUT SOMEHOW I DON'T THINK THE CLAN WOULD HAVE LET ME TAKE MY THINGS, OR MAC'S, WITHOUT TRYING TO KEEP ME AROUND. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN NICE TO TALK FOR A WHILE, SAY OUR GOODBYES, BUT IT CAN'T WORK LIKE THAT AND WE BOTH KNOW IT.

I'M SORRY I COULDN'T BE THE ONE TO TELL YOU ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED IN EDINBURGH. I'M SURE THEY TOLD YOU ALL ABOUT IT, HOW BRAVE MAC WAS WHEN HE KILLED THE DEMON. HE DIED IN BATTLE, THE WAY HE WOULD HAVE WANTED TO DIE. THEY BURIED HIS REMAINS IN IRELAND, IN THE FAMILY CEMETERY. I THINK IT HELPED HIS FAMILY TO HAVE A GRAVE TO VISIT THIS TIME.

SARAH TOLD ME THAT YOU'RE TAKING OVER FOR HIM IN SALEM, AND I KNOW HE WOULD HAVE WANTED IT THAT WAY. YOU'LL DO WELL, YOU HAD A GOOD TEACHER. I HOPE SOMEONE'S TAKING CARE OF EDDIE. HE DID GOOD FOR MAC, HE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO TAKE UP HUNTING AGAIN.

TELL FORD HE DOESN'T HAVE TO WORRY I'LL START HUNTING EITHER, BECAUSE I WON'T. HE MAY NOT BELIEVE IT, BUT IT'S TRUE, I SWEAR IT. I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M GOING TO DO FROM HERE, BUT I DO KNOW THAT I'LL BE DAMN HAPPY IF I NEVER SEE ANOTHER VAMP IN MY LIFE. I HOPE YOU UNDERSTAND IT'S NOT PERSONAL.

I'M NOT COMING BACK, JIMMY. WE ALL KNOW MAC WAS THE ONLY REASON I WAS THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE. I DON'T THINK I COULD STAND TO SHARE BLOOD WITH ANYONE ELSE, AND IT'S NOT WORTH A LIFE, MINE OR SOMEONE ELSE'S, TO GIVE IT A TRY.

TAKE CARE, JIMMY, AND WATCH YOUR BACK.

ELIZA

It took a few trips to load up the cars, but finally we were ready to go. I stood in the drive and looked up at the house for the last time, knowing that if I ever saw it again, I'd be a prisoner, or dead. It hurt to think that way, it really did, but there was no helping it. With a sigh I turned and joined the others in the garage where Glenn was opening a gateway to the Brennan farm.

I had just begun repacking my things a bit neater when Corrine came through a gateway that Jared had opened from her apartment. She'd seen the others going through the cars for tracking devices or bugs, and came upstairs to put her things in the room that we shared.

"Did you get everything that you wanted?" she asked as she sat down in a chair in the corner of the room.

"If I didn't then I don't need it," I murmured absently, pausing to take a look at what was left spread out on the bed.

"If you do think of something I don't want you to go back," she replied softly. "It wouldn't be too obvious if I went in fo—"

"You won't go one foot toward that house," I told her firmly. "Do you hear me? If I didn't get it then I don't need it. Promise me." I realized instantly that she didn't like the order I'd barked unthinking.

"Fine," she whispered, sinking down in the chair.

I dropped the shirt I was holding on the bed and went over to her, crouching in front of her. "Luv, I didn't mean to snap at you. I just know they're not going to be happy with the fact I'm not coming back, and I don't want them to try and use you as a bargaining chip for my obedience again." If they did I'd have no choice but to go back, to play bitch to whomever they wanted me to. Even the thought of it scared me to death. "If I thought you'd listen, I'd tell you to get the hell out of Salem, but if you have to stay there, please promise me you'll at least try and stay out of their way."

She squeezed my hand reassuringly. "I have no reason to be near them now, so of course I'll stay out of their way," she told me. "I won't leave Salem, though, and I appreciate the fact that you respect my wishes enough to not try to talk me into going. If I leave as well then that fuels their desire to find you. With me still close then they feel like they still have some control."

That didn't make me feel any better. I didn't like the Tremere thinking they had any control over my daughter, but for this, like so many other things, there was no changing it. I did my best to put my worries out of my mind for the time being, and talked Corrine into helping me finish packing.

HARD TRUTHS

THE SUN GOES DOWN

I FEEL THE LIGHT BETRAY ME

LINKIN PARK - PAPERCUT

Christmas in Galway was peaceful. Giving the family the gifts Mac and I had picked out together both hurt and helped ease the ache in my heart. Sometimes I could pretend he was there watching everyone open their gifts, and though it was hard I managed not to cry. Well, not in front of anyone, anyway.

The trip back to Salem for my things hadn't had the cleansing effect I'd hoped it would. In fact I missed our old life more now than I had before our little raid. I suppose knowing that I could never go back had something to do with it.

We went back to Nashville on the first day of the New Year. My resolution was to try and live as best I could without Mac around. I knew it would be hard, but I also knew I didn't have any other choice. Glenn and Siofra noticed the change in my attitude without comment, for which I was grateful.

As much as I appreciated their help, I knew that I couldn't stay with the Glenn and Siofra much longer. The Tremere knew I wasn't coming back, and I didn't think they'd take my decision lying down. Sooner or later they'd find a way to get past all the fancy wards Glenn had put on the house, and they'd come after me. Staying with the Johnsons would only put them in danger, and that was the last thing I wanted to do after they'd done so much to help me. I had to stand on my own two feet, had to get out on my own.

I hit the streets the next day looking for a job. There wasn't much I was qualified for. I didn't have the stable background required to get a security job somewhere, and not many legitimate places hired killers on a regular basis. I wasn't much into working for the bad guys, no matter what species they were. Soup kitchens and shelters didn't want to pay much, if anything. I settled for trying to find a waitress job.

The few places that were hiring didn't look real promising. Toward late afternoon on the third day of my job search I finally gave up and walked into a bar near downtown that had seen better days. I sat down at the bar and lit a cigarette. When the tired looking bartender came over to me, I ordered a drink and thought about the last few days.

The bartender was handing me my fourth drink when I realized I had company. Two large men were sitting on the barstools to my left and right, and both paying damn close attention to me. I studied them in the mirror over the bar, but they seemed to be waiting for me to do something.

I looked at the man on my left. "Can I do something for you?"

The man on my right answered. "You look familiar. What's your name?"

"Trouble," I shot back irritably. "Go away."

"I think she's the one," the guy on my left told him.

I paid the bartender and tried to push back from the bar, but the man on my right grabbed the back of my stool and it didn't move. That kind of strength meant he wasn't human and I was betting he was a ghoul.

"Look, buddy," I said softly, keeping both hands on the bar. "Take your hand off the chair. Walk away before you get something broken."

The first guy grinned at the second one. "I think she threatened you, Bill."

I made myself stronger, faster, and it was so good to feel the power rushing through me without the need to heave. I smiled, and to my surprise Bill backed off. His buddy wasn't so smart.

Ten minutes later I wiped the blood from my hands on a napkin and walked out of the bar. It didn't bother me that I'd beaten both men down, and a couple of others besides. They'd be sore for a while, but at least they'd live.

Stepping onto the sidewalk I realized the sun was nearly below the horizon. I tried to bury the fear I felt, but I was miles from the house and I knew that vamps would be up before I could get there. It was too much to hope that I'd make it without any more trouble.

I was right. I'd barely gotten to the car when a face sprung up in the backseat of the car next to it. My instincts told me it was a vamp long before the bared fangs did. I hurried into my car but before I could get it started, an arm came through the window, reaching for my throat. A flash of my knife made it pull away, and a second later the engine roared to life. There was no time for a seat belt.

It took all of my concentration to keep the car on the road, going as fast as I was. I'm not a crack driver, but unfortunately the guys behind me were. They pulled some kind of maneuver that put my car in the ditch where it started to roll. It came to rest only when it hit a building.

Shaking my head to clear it, I climbed out of the broken window. I knew I couldn't stop to baby the broken ribs I could feel grinding in my chest, and I didn't dare take the time to heal them, not and have any blood left over to fight with. As the other car came to a stop and started to back toward me, I took off, running as fast as I could in the opposite direction. I didn't get very far.

A black van stopped not ten feet in front of me, and the side door opened, spilling young looking vampires into the street. Most of them I'd seen before, at the Nashville chantry with Mac. I took a defensive stance with a stake in both hands and hoped I could fight my way through them. When I saw the tranquilizer gun in Nick Rico's hand, I knew there was no way they were going to let me get away.

Throwing a stake at the gun in Nick's hand and knocking it to the ground was easy, getting away was not. I'd fought vampires before, even two or three at a time, but half a dozen was too much for me, even after I managed to stake a couple of them.

I nearly cried in relief when I heard Siofra's voice in my head. Somehow I managed to get most of the vamps off of me, and a moment later a gateway opened to my right. A crossbow quarrel knocked the last vampire away, and a hand on my arm pulled me through the gateway where I landed in the main hall of the house. Siofra helped me to my feet and carefully led me toward a chair near the fireplace.

"What happened?" Glenn asked as he put down the crossbow.

"The Tremere, I think," she answered tersely. "Give her a minute to catch her breath."

"I'm all right," I protested softly, leaning back and closing my eyes. My ribs hurt and my entire body ached from running and fighting, but I was safe now. "Just a little fun with fighting, that's all."

"You should have called," Siofra chastised.

"Couldn't, the phone was trashed with the car." I held my hand against my ribs, trying to minimize their movement when I breathed. It didn't help. "I'd have been alright, but there were just too many of them," I admitted without opening my eyes. "I stayed out too long, I'm sorry."

Breathing was really starting to hurt, and I didn't have enough blood left to heal my ribs without passing out. I tried to sit up, thinking that if I just got into bed, I could stay there for a couple of days, just until I felt better. Then I'd have to get the hell out of Nashville.

"Stay still," Glenn ordered, laying a hand on my shoulder and pushing me back. Before I could protest, a wave of heat swept over me. Suddenly I could breathe again, and the pain from my other injuries faded away.

I opened my eyes and glared at him. "Ask next time. I'd have been alright."

He just shook his head. "What happened?"

Sitting up I took stock of what weapons I had left. Surprisingly I'd only lost one knife in the skirmish, although all of my stakes were gone. "Couple of ghouls in a bar," I said shortly, angry at how badly the fight had gone for me. "They were easy enough to get away from, but they delayed me long enough for the sun to go down. I should have known better." Maybe if I hadn't crashed the car, I'd have been alright. "My car is toast, too."

"We'll get your car back," Glenn assured me. "I'm more worried about you right now."

"You healed me," I reminded him irritably. "I'm five by five." I looked at them sadly for a moment, knowing I'd miss them, miss being a part of the family, but the Tremere weren't going to go away, and they were never going to let me live in peace. "I want to thank you for all that you've done for me," I said softly. "But now I think it's time for me to go."

Siofra frowned. "Go? Go where?"

"Elsewhere." It took a bit of concentration to stand, but I managed. I was a little weak from using blood, but I knew I'd be okay in a few days. "I can't stay here, you know that. I can't live cooped up in this house and I can't go out without the Tremere trying to get me back. They had a tranq gun tonight, I was damn lucky they didn't hit me with it."

She nodded. "We'll take you to Galway then."

"No." As much as I liked Mac's parents, I wasn't going to put them in danger. "Look, I appreciate all you've done, really, but I've got to head out on my own. I can stay a step ahead of them, I've done it before." I looked at Glenn pleadingly. "If you can just open a gateway somewhere, maybe Montana, or Kansas. There can't be many vamps there, you know?"

"You've been through a lot tonight," he said softly. "Why don't you get something to eat right now, and a good night's sleep? We'll talk about this in the morning."

"You can't talk me out of this," I warned him. "You know I can't stay here."

"I know." He looked as if he really meant that. "We'll talk about it tomorrow, okay?"

I nodded and headed downstairs to the kitchen. Food and sleep sounded good to me, and I'd be stronger tomorrow, better able to handle whatever the Tremere threw my way.

Looking back on it now, it's amazing how peaceful that night was, compared to the chaos of the next week. Glenn and I did talk the next day, but it wasn't about gateways to the plains states. He and Siofra had come up with a plan, and I had to admit it was a good one.

The next few days were a flurry of activity. We spent a day in Atlantic City, sunrise to sunset, and by the time night fell, we had more money than I would ever know what to do with. We were safely back in Nashville before any vampires could be up and around, counting the cash.

Then there was house shopping. I'm not sure how they managed, but we looked at almost a dozen houses on as many islands before they found one that would do. The house was on the back half of a small old fashioned island, where it seemed like all the men were fishermen and there were no supernatural any things to be found.

It took a couple of days for the paperwork to clear, but by end of the second week in January, I was moving into my new home and starting my new existence.

NEW BEGINNINGS

AND IF YOU HAVE TO LEAVE I WISH THAT YOU WOULD JUST LEAVE
BECAUSE YOUR PRESENCE STILL LINGERS HERE AND IT WON'T LEAVE ME ALONE
EVANESCENCE - MY IMMORTAL

Hog Island was off the coast of Virginia. It was small enough and close enough to other tourist locations that it hadn't become a tourist trap itself. Walking through the small town, it seemed to me that everywhere I looked I saw only fishermen and mothers with children. As far as I could tell there had never been a vampire on the island, ever, let alone a werewolf, or even a fairy.

The property we'd found on the back side of the island was mostly rolling hills and grass, but there were shrubs near the ocean and the house, and a little ways inland was a few stands of trees. You couldn't see the house from the road, and you couldn't see any other sign of civilization unless you were on the second floor of the house or in the apartment over the garage. The closest house was over a mile away.

The house itself had three bedrooms, the largest of which was just off a loft area on the second floor. The garage had an economy apartment above it, which made things nice for Glenn and Siofra when they visited. Between the house and the garage was a small pool and a hot tub.

The house came furnished, so the contents weren't the best, but they're were better than what I'd been used to before Mac had come back into my life. We set up one of the bedrooms downstairs as a library, and the other as a guest room.

With my new home came a new identity. When I'd signed the papers, I'd done it with a conscious thought about getting the signature right. Elizabeth "Beth" Taylor wasn't too much different from Eliza Gentry, so I hoped I'd get used to it quickly. Of course it wasn't like I hadn't used a fake name before.

I'd called Corrine the day we'd signed the papers and told her I was moving because I needed to stop hiding at the Johnson's house. I think she knew there was more to the story, but thankfully she didn't ask. She agreed to come and stay for a few days to help me settle in.

She seemed a bit worried when she came through the portal with Glenn, but I did my best to make her think I was doing all right. And I was, for the most part. Moving hadn't helped my grief much, and I still felt like if I just turned around fast enough I'd see Mac there, but I was coping as best I could.

Still, she was worried about how I'd get on, living alone on the island. "I could transfer some money over to you," she offered. "It's really yours, you know."

"No, luv," I replied gently. "It's yours, all of it. And anyway, I don't need it. Glenn and Siofra came up with the money to buy this place, and it won't take much to live on. I'm gonna find a job, I'll be okay."

"But I feel like you should have it," she insisted. "You worked hard for that money, you shouldn't—"

"Get a dime of it," I said firmly. "The work I did for that money was so that you would be safe. I wouldn't feel right taking any of it back, and besides," I continued over her attempt to protest, "The Tremere are going to be watching that money, if any of it gets to me, they'll know where to find me."

Of course she hadn't thought about that. One of the reasons I love my daughter so much is that she knows so little about guile and treachery that she doesn't even think about the

conspiracies that vampires try to rule the world by. The topic of giving me money was dropped.

She planned on staying three or four days with me. She said she wanted to stay longer, but she knew she was being watched and didn't want to raise any suspicions. The way she said it made me think that she'd been telling a few too many stories to her friends and she didn't need another one to try and remember.

That bothered me. It was bad enough that I couldn't see her as often as I liked anymore, but to think that she had to lie every day to protect me was too much. "I don't want the Tremere hassling you. Maybe you should stay away from me." I hated even the thought of not seeing her again, but I'd done worse things to protect her.

"Are you crazy?" she demanded, putting an arm around me. "You can't keep me away so don't even try. I've told them that I don't know where you are and that's that. I'm not going to let them keep me from you and I don't want to hear another word about it."

She changed the subject quickly, and I let her. As much as I knew it would be better for Corrine if she stayed away from me, I knew I would hate it if she did. The time I spent with her was all I had to look forward to.

A little later I asked her about Brian, and she finally admitted what I'd suspected for a while. They weren't getting along well anymore, not since Corrine was gone so often and never really told him where she was going to.

"I'm not sure what I'm going to do about it," she admitted softly. "He's not a part of my world, and I don't think he can really understand where I'm at right now."

"Normal people can't possibly know what it's like to live the way we have to," I said carefully. "It has nothing to do with magic and everything to do with knowing. He's been told what the world is really like, but he's never seen it like we have. He'll never really understand, and you'll never be able to explain it to him."

"You're right. He can't know what it's like." She went to one of the sliding glass doors and looked out toward the pool. "I don't know if it's fair to keep seeing him like this."

"It's not fair to you either, luv." I followed her to the window and put my hands on her shoulders. I wanted to comfort her, but there was nothing good about the situation she was in. "It's hard trying to live a normal life with people who don't know what's really out there. At least he knows there are other things out there, you don't have to lie to him all the time."

"Part of me wants to stop this now before one of us gets hurt," she said thoughtfully. "But another part wonders what if... what if he's it? What if he's the one?"

We'd tried to avoid mentioning Mac, but now I couldn't stop myself from thinking of him. I'd known from the very instant I'd laid eyes on him that he was it for me. "If he was you'd know it, luv," I told her, trying very hard to keep my voice even as I moved away. I lit a cigarette and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. "For real now, if he was you wouldn't be wondering, and nothing would matter as long as you could be with him."

"Remember when you took me to New York?" she asked softly. "To that neighborhood where you lived as a girl? You said that if I ever found someone that I would have lived there, in that neighborhood with, that he was the one. Do you remember that?"

I closed my eyes at the memory. I could feel her gaze on me and lowered my head so that my hair would hide the tears on my face. "I remember," I replied tightly. If Mac would just come back, I'd live with him anywhere he wanted to, even if it meant going back to the Tremere.

She seemed to realize how much her words had upset me, and came over to hug me from behind. "Enough of this. Let's go for a walk on the beach. What do you say?"

I put my hand over hers but took care to keep my face turned away until I could wipe my eyes. Taking a deep breath for courage, I said, "Finish what you were saying first, what about the trip we took to New York?"

"I don't know," she said shyly, tucking her face in the curve of my neck. "I think I'd live there with him but it's hard right now. But isn't that what relationships are all about? It isn't always easy."

Leaning my head against hers, I remembered what it had been with Mac and me when I'd first found out he was a vampire. It had taken me a long time to get used to. "No, it's not always easy." Pushing thoughts of the past away, I put out my cigarette and turned to her. "Walk on the beach then?"

She nodded, but looked at me sadly. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to remind you of anything. I miss him, too."

It hurt to smile, but I did it anyway. "Everything reminds me of him, Corrine, it wasn't anything you did. I thought it would be better here, but..." I looked toward the stairs where I could have sworn I'd seen Mac earlier that day, but there was nothing there now, no one. Mac was gone, and he wasn't coming back. I turned back to Corrine. "I know you miss him, luv, but it will get better. Your pain will heal."

"So will yours," she told me. "We'll get through this, together."

I couldn't stand there and tell her that my pain would never go away even though I knew it wouldn't. It would sit where my heart used to be and color my world black for the rest of my life. I put on a brave smile and held out my hand. "Let's go outside. Maybe the fresh air will clear my head."

Hand in hand we walked down the path to the beach and headed east, away from the setting sun. It was strange not to worry about being in the open as the sun went down, but I was safe on the island, for now anyway.

"Have the Tremere been back to bother you?" I asked her after a few minutes.

"No," she replied easily. "I'm sure they'll leave me alone, really."

"I wish I could be there to make sure it stayed that way." Just another one of the wishes I knew would never happen.

"I think they are convinced that I don't know where you are," she told me. "No one has stopped by since James did the other night. I talked to Jared and he agreed to put some wards on my apartment. I come to you through a portal so they can't track me. Don't worry, please. You have so much to worry about without me adding to it."

"I know. You've got other people to look after you now, but I still worry." I squeezed her hand softly, knowing there was nothing she could do or say that would make me stop worrying about her. "I really thought about going back to Salem, Corrine, but I just don't think I could have done it."

She shook her head firmly. "Don't worry about it. I can come to you. Soon I'll be able to come to you on my own and that will cut out Glenn and Siofra as middle men."

"I just—I want you to be careful, Corrine. I don't want you in any danger. If I thought they'd hurt you..." I looked out over the water thinking about the things I'd have to do if the Tremere decided to use her for leverage. I didn't like the thought of going back to them, but I knew I would, if I had to. That or stop by the chantry for a house burning. "I'd rather go back to the Tremere than see anything happen to you."

She stopped and turned toward me. "If I thought I was in any danger believe me, I'd be out of there so fast I'd create a mini tornado," she said firmly. "I could find a mentor anywhere. But if I did that would be like running away. Mac wouldn't want me to do that. I know it. I'm standing my ground and not budging an inch."

"Mac would want you to be safe, Corrine," I shot back quickly. "I can't make sure they leave you alone, not anymore. Maybe you should go to Galway, the Brennans would be able to teach you, and they'd be more than happy to have you come live with them."

"Let's just wait and see what happens, okay?" she said with a reassuring smile. "I'm not really big with the whole sticking my neck out anymore than the next person but I have a good bond with Jared and I am learning from him. Besides that, Sam and I are learning each others Traditions. I don't want to make any rash decisions right now, okay. Trust me, I won't do anything stupid."

I wished I could believe that being careful was all it took to be safe from the Tremere. I wished I could believe that she was safe in Salem. I wished that Corrine didn't think she could take care of everything by herself. For all the good it did me, I might as well wish that Mac was still with me. I smiled a little at my thoughts and started down the beach again.

"I could try to argue with you, but you'll just do what you want to anyway." The air was a little cool, and I rubbed my arms to warm them. "Maybe they'll give up if I'm not seen for a while. Maybe then I can visit Nashville without worrying about them every time I leave the house."

"I'm sure they will," she said as she walked faster to catch up with me. "No more talk about the Tremere, okay? Let's go to the market and splurge a little. How about lobster for dinner? What do you say? Siofra would really like it."

It was easy enough to turn away from the painful subjects of Mac and the Tremere. We spent several long days together with Siofra and Ian, who were also staying with me. We enjoyed the sun and the beach, lighting fires in the sand and playing with Ian. I let myself relax as much as I could and just enjoyed the time with my family.

While I'd had a hard time thinking about being part of a family without Mac around, it got easier as time went on. Cara had been right; I didn't have to be alone unless I wanted to be. Over the next few weeks that was proven over and over. The family came and went, keeping me company for a few hours or a few days, easing the emptiness of the long weeks alone. Months ago I might have felt that they were babysitting me, checking on me a little too often for comfort, but now when everyone was gone the house was a little too quiet and I welcomed their company.

When I was alone I spent too much time thinking about Mac, about what I'd lost that night in Edinburgh. There were many times when I thought I saw him in the house, or on the beach. I knew it was just my imagination and loneliness, but that didn't make it any easier to bear. I still missed him so much, and the almost daily reminders of him kept my grief at the forefront of my thoughts.

Siofra insisted that my grief would ease, that when I settled in, everything would be much better. She wanted so badly for me to be happy on the island, but I wasn't sure that would happen anywhere, not without Mac. We'd had such a short time together to be happy, when he died he'd taken all of my happiness with him and left nothing but an empty aching shell.

"I'm not going to fit in here, Siofra," I told her simply one afternoon over coffee.

She looked up from her cup in surprise. "Why do you say that?"

"I'm a freak," I reminded her as gently as I could. "Sooner or later someone's going to realize that."

"You're not a freak," she said angrily.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Any other dhampyr on the island?" I demanded. "Even a high gen vamp or a ghoul? No?" We both knew there wasn't, it was one of the reasons we'd chosen this island. "I'm a freak."

"Only if you let yourself be, Eliza," she told me. "Otherwise you are just a normal woman who's trying to move on with her life."

I wished it could be that simple, but my life never was. "Maybe on the surface, but on the inside, I'm still a freak. I'll live longer than all of these people. I'm stronger, faster, I can make them do what I want them to—" I stopped, remembering what it had been like for me growing up among the clueless. The only time I'd felt anything remotely like normal had been when I'd been Mac's ghoul, and I wasn't going back to the Tremere, not alive, anyway. "I'm a freak."

"But you have no reason to use any of that here," she said logically. "Now you have the chance to do things just for yourself, to be normal."

"I suppose that is true," I agreed.

I let the subject drop, but after she'd gone home I thought about it some more. Sooner or later my true nature would come through. One day I'd have to move too quickly, or heal too well. Eventually someone was going to notice, and when that happened, I'd have to make them forget.

My real worry was about what would happen when the Tremere found me. I wasn't naïve enough to believe it would never happen, because as well as I'd hidden, some day I'd look up to see a ghoul waiting for me, or feel that tingle in my gut that told me a vampire was close by. When that happened I'd have to go back to the clan or die. Maybe both.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

I'VE BECOME SO NUMB
I CAN'T FEEL YOU THERE
LINKIN PARK - NUMB

Beth Taylor settled in to the house on Hog's Island. She explored Broadwater, the only town on the island, found the grocery store in town, and the hardware, and the ferry to the mainland. She wore my rings on a chain and told everyone that she moved to the island because she'd broken up with her boyfriend and needed a change in her life. She stashed so many weapons around the house that I almost felt comfortable. She drove my repaired car with magically altered VIN numbers that couldn't be traced. By the end of my first week alone I was sick of Beth Taylor.

It wasn't that she wasn't me; she was, for the most part. I was finally getting to do what I'd thought I wanted most; live a normal life. I didn't like pretending I wasn't mourning the love of my life, but that wasn't the worst part.

The worst part about being Beth Taylor was that she didn't feel Mac.

In the months since he'd died I could feel him most of the time, with me, watching me. I'd see him out of the corner of my eye but when I turned to look I was alone. I'd close my eyes at night and swear I heard him call my name. But right around the time Siofra and Corrine left the island, I noticed that I didn't see him anywhere, didn't feel him anymore.

I walked the beach for hours and threw stones into the sea. I cleaned out flower beds and the garage. I wandered around Broadwater until I knew the streets by heart. I couldn't feel him anywhere. For real now, it was almost like losing him all over again and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

Dwelling on it wouldn't make it better, so I set about finding a job. There were only three hundred or so people on the island, most of them living in or very close to Broadwater. Working in the bookstore or the library was out, and the few restaurants and bars on the island weren't looking for help. I made my way to the only nursery on the island and to my surprise the owner was willing to talk to me.

Gladys Lindley was an older widow woman who was just beginning to have serious problems with arthritis. She'd just gotten it settled in her mind that this year she needed someone to help her out when I'd shown up.

Spring was just around the corner, and even in late February there were things to do inside the two large greenhouses Gladys' husband had built for her before he died. It was nice to be able to lose myself in hard work, cleaning and planting, preparing for the growing season.

The only problem with working was the inevitable questions about my past. I explained to Gladys that I'd had a bad breakup and I'd needed a change of scenery, a new start. She sympathized and said things that she thought would make me feel better, but didn't. It wasn't her fault, she was just trying to be nice, but I knew I couldn't tell her the truth.

I didn't make a lot of money working for Gladys, but it was enough to cover the utilities and groceries. It was a fresh start, in a way, but given a choice I'd much rather have gone on living in the house in Salem with my vampire lover.

I wasn't happy, but I was getting along. I'd always liked working with plants so the nursery was a good place to be. I planned what I would plant around the house come spring, although I couldn't help but feel like I should just leave it the way it was. I didn't want to stand in the courtyard some day looking at another yard I would never see come to life with the spring.

Still, I knew I could spend my time yearning for something I'd never have again and worrying Corrine and the family, or I could make the best of the situation. I put on a brave face and did just that.

Alone in the house things were quiet, almost too quiet. I found myself remembering how Mac had once commented sarcastically that I should get a dog if I wanted to hear something else breathe, and a few days later I found myself bringing home a young Golden Retriever. It was only a few months old and needed almost constant supervision, but when it curled up next to me warm and trusting in the big empty bed, I was glad for his company. I named it Eddie so that I wouldn't forget that without his help I'd never have gotten away from the Tremere in Edinburgh.

I kept my life simple, which was easy enough to do on the island. Corrine visited every other weekend, and Glenn and Siofra more often than that. Even Mac's parents stopped by from time to time, bringing Cara and Stephen when either was around.

I'm sure people on the island might have thought me antisocial, but the thing was that I didn't want to make friends. In the long run I'd just have to lie to them, or see them hurt when the Tremere showed up on my doorstep. It was better for everyone if I stayed away, if the only friends I had were family. It would have to be enough. For real now, it was more than I'd ever had before.

RELIGHT THE FLAME

AND BABY I WISHED FOR YOU
FIONA APPLE - LOVE RIDDEN

One night in early March, a soft sound in the middle of the night pulled me from sleep. A heartbeat later my hand was on the knife under my pillow, but even before she spoke I could see that the intruder in my room was Siofra.

"Eliza, wake up," she said softly as I glanced at the glowing numbers on the alarm clock.

"Siofra, it's like, three o'clock," I grumbled as I eased Eddie out of the way so I could turn on the bedside lamp. "What's your trauma?"

"You have to come with me," she told me urgently. "Get dressed."

I couldn't figure out what she was doing in my room in the middle of the night, but I knew it had to be important or she wouldn't be there. I reached for my clothes. "Is it your father?" I knew he'd been sick a year or so ago, but I'd thought he'd gotten over that. "The Tremere?"

"No," she said with a smile. "Hurry up, you'll see when we get there."

I dressed as quickly as I could. Within five minutes I'd gathered Eddie and we were walking through a gateway into her parent's living room. I could hear animated voices and laughter in the kitchen, but I couldn't make out one voice from another in the excited din.

"What's up?" I asked her as I sat the dog down. He immediately headed for the kitchen and the smell of food.

"Come sit down," she said as she took my arm and led me toward the couch. She sat down beside me and took a deep breath. "Mac's alive."

At first I didn't understand what she was saying, but when I did I got mad. "What are you talking about?" I demanded angrily. "He's dead, you know that. I told you, I watched him die."

"No," she countered, sounding very pleased. "He's alive, he's here."

I didn't get it. I'd thought we'd become friends, but friends didn't do something this cruel. I'd have given anything to have Mac back, but it wasn't going to happen, it couldn't. Even if she wasn't lying and by some twist of fate Mac had come back I knew there were no vampires in the house simply because my spider sense wasn't going off.

Siofra just smiled at me and turned her head toward the doorway. "Mac!"

"What?" came a man's reply from the kitchen, a man who I had to admit sounded a hell of a lot like my lover.

"Come in here!" she called to him.

I wanted to scream in frustration, but I couldn't stop from staring at the doorway. A moment later he was there, tall and dark, handsome and so real that I wanted to run into his arms. It couldn't be him, but I wanted it to be him so badly that I couldn't stand it.

The room swirled around me and I surrendered willingly to the darkness that swallowed me whole. In the darkness Mac was holding me gently, carrying me away with him. I could feel him, smell him, and I wanted nothing more than to stay where he was real.

From a distance I heard Siofra calling my name and felt a soft tapping on the side of my face. I wanted to open my eyes, but I didn't want to wake up only to find that I'd imagined my lover.

Finally I could put it off no longer. I opened my eyes and looked first at Siofra, then into Mac's worried face. I sat up and slowly reached out toward him, but stopped just short of touching his skin. "Am I dreaming?" I whispered.

His smile warmed parts of me that had been frozen for months. "No, luv, you're not dreaming."

"You're alive." I touched his face and at first it was cold, but then it was warm, as warm as mine. My vampire radar was silent but the temperature of his skin and the sound of his breathing told me he wasn't Kindred. I ran my hand downward to his neck where I could feel the beat of his pulse. "You're human. How—?"

I realized suddenly that I didn't care how, or why. He was back, it didn't matter what form he was in this time. I threw my arms around his neck and started crying. "I missed you so much," I whispered through my tears.

He held me until I could control myself again, but even then I didn't want to let go of him. I guess I thought if I let go he'd fade away. He seemed to understand and kept my hand when he led me into the kitchen where everyone else was gathered. To my surprise, Angus was sitting at the table next to Cara.

It seemed that neither of the resurrected men wanted to share any details about what had happened. They'd shown up that morning at the family home, a bit cold from the weather, but none the worse for having been dead only hours before. Honestly I didn't care about the whys and wherefores. Mac was back and that was all that mattered.

We spent hours talking, bringing both Angus and Mac up to speed on what had happened since they had died. When Siofra left only to come back minutes later with Ian, Angus seemed surprised.

"What's the bairn's name?" he asked around a mouthful of food.

"Ian Angus Johnson," Siofra said with a proud smile.

Mac gave his brother a dry look. "You get remembered."

"You did too," Angus reminded him. "Corrine Mackenzie."

"That's my own child," Mac replied with a grin.

"And when will I be meeting your lass?" he asked.

Mac looked to Alaster, who shook his head. "Still can't reach her, son. As soon as I do, I'll be bringing her here, you can be sure of that."

He nodded then looked at me questioningly. "What happened to my things?"

I glanced at Glenn and Siofra, debating on what to tell him for a moment before deciding on the truth. It wasn't like he was Tremere anymore. "We went for a bit of B&E while Jimmy was dead for the day and got most of it."

He frowned. "What do you mean by 'most of it'?"

"We had our priorities. Weapons, all of my stuff," I told him. "The cars and the bike too. Didn't get many of your clothes though, your pants don't fit me."

"You've been sleeping in my shirts again, haven't you?" he demanded gently.

"Everything's at the house," I said, blushing at the truth of his words.

"The house?"

"We settled Eliza into a house on Hog Island," Glenn told him. "She couldn't leave the house in Nashville without being followed."

"Or worse," Siofra added.

Before they could say any more, I cut in. "I think you'll like it, Mac. It's on the beach, and we've got lots of privacy. The island's great."

We talked about the house and the island for a little while, at least until Mac started yawning. His mother immediately insisted that he go to bed, and since I still didn't want him

out of my sight, I went with him. He made a date with Angus to visit the pub the next night, and let Noinen bustle him off to his room.

She fussed around the room for a few minutes, making sure the sheets were clean and the pillows fluffed. When she would have closed the curtains, he insisted they stay open. With a tear in her eye, she hugged him one last time and left us alone.

Mac smiled at me sleepily, and I finished bundling him into bed. I laid down beside him with his arms around me and my head on his shoulder. It was strange to hear his heartbeat thumping in my ear, to feel his body warm up against mine, but it was good, very good.

After a while I asked him what it was like to be dead. He didn't really answer me, except to say that it had been lonely, with no way to communicate with the spirits around him. Sadly I remembered feeling like that the night he died. Everyone around me had just been shadows that I couldn't really see, didn't really hear. Even later when I'd been with Corrine and the others, I'd still felt like I was the only person in a dark and lonely world. I was glad that was over now, for both of us.

When he explained that he'd reformed in his coffin and dug his way out of the ground I wanted to cry. His hands were healed now, taken care of by his mother, but I knew the scars from that graveyard birth would stay with him for a long time. I held him close and gave him what comfort I could.

In time, we slept.

SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER HIM

A STROKE OF LUCK OR A GIFT FROM GOD?
THE HAND OF FATE OR DEVIL'S CLAWS?
GARBAGE - A STROKE OF LUCK

When I woke up early the next morning, I laid there for a while, watching Mac's chest rise and fall, listening to him breathe. It was so strange to feel the warmth of his skin, to know that his heart beat again, that he was as alive as I was after all this time. For real now, it didn't matter to me if he came back warm as the summer sun or cold as the dead of winter, as long as he was back.

Eventually my bladder took me out of the room, and my stomach took over from there. I would have simply grabbed some fruit and went back to watch Mac sleep, but Noinen and Alaster were already up, so I sat with them in the kitchen while we ate.

A little while later Siofra, Glenn and Ian came downstairs. She looked a little disappointed that Mac wasn't up yet, but she hid it quickly. We talked about what had happened for a little while, about the spell she'd done as a teenager, but really we were all just waiting for Mac to wake up.

In the middle of a sentence Siofra looked up with a start and hurriedly passed Ian to Glenn. Without a word she bounded out of the room, followed quickly by her parents. Glenn and I shared a worried glance before following them through the house to Mac's room.

"Why is there a big gray wolf on the floor?" we heard Siofra ask as we approached.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Mac replied, sounding a little panicked.

We reached the doorway and I slid into the room behind his father, taking in the fact that a large gray wolf was sitting on the floor near the bed, looking up at Mac like it was his best friend. I wasn't sure if it were friendly, but it hadn't attacked yet, so there was hope. If it did decide to attack, I was too far away to stop it.

Siofra took a step closer to the creature. "Where did it come from?"

Mac just shook his head. "I don't know, but it's talking to me."

"What did it say?"

"'Hello', and it knows my name." He dipped his head for a closer look at the wolf's stomach. "*He* knows my name."

"Is it a werewolf?" Siofra asked.

"I don't think so," he replied. "He doesn't look familiar."

"What's his name?" she demanded. "Did you ask him?"

"Gwrhyr," he said softly. He looked around the room at the six of us crowded near the door for a moment, then turned back to the dog. "Do you all hear that?" he asked with just a hint of desperation in his voice.

Glenn shifted the baby on his hip and exchanged a look with Siofra. Alaster simply shook his head, but Noinen looked really worried. I hoped that coming back from the dead and clawing his way out of the grave hadn't affected Mac's mind.

"Hear what?" Siofra asked.

He looked back at the wolf. "He's here to guide me to my destiny."

Siofra shot him a puzzled look, but I couldn't keep my mouth shut. "I thought you didn't believe in destiny?"

"I'm beginning to think there's something more to it," he admitted, ignoring Glenn's grin.

"Perhaps he's a spirit guide, a totem animal of some sort," Alaster suggested.

"An avatar?" Mac asked hopefully.

"Not technically, no," his father replied as he gazed at the wolf. "I don't think so."

"So you have a pet," Siofra murmured, then looked at me. "Think he'll get along with the puppy?"

Mac looked at me in surprise. "The puppy's yours?" When I nodded, he turned back to the wolf. "So can you talk to anyone else? 'Cause they all think I'm loosing it." After a moment, he looked at his family. "Someone speak to it please. Him."

Siofra stepped forward. "All right."

"In your mind, please, and if you'll excuse me," he headed for the door of the bedroom in much the same way I had earlier. I figured that nature was catching up to him after nearly sixteen hours of sleep.

"He came from the deep umbra," Siofra told us after a moment of communicating with the wolf. "He 'blinked' into the house, he came back with Mac, and he's here to guide Mac on his destiny. He says we can't protect Mac forever, that he's here to guide him, to protect him and make sure he gets to his destiny." She looked at us thoughtfully. "He's not saying what that destiny is."

"Is it normal for wolves to talk like that?" I asked as Mac came back from the bathroom.

"No, I don't think so," Siofra replied. "You know, I've never talked to one before."

Alaster explained that spirit guides sometimes took the form of animals but I didn't understand most of what he said. Eventually the rest of the family left to go finish their breakfast.

I kept an eye on Mac's face as he communicated with the wolf, not really sure if I should be there, but unwilling to leave him alone with the creature. Mac's family didn't think it was a threat, but I didn't want to take any chances. When Mac started looking very disappointed, I wanted nothing more than to kill it just to stop it from hurting him.

Slowly I moved around the edge of the room, wanting to be ready in case the wolf decided to attack after all. My hand was on the hilt of my knife, but somehow I managed not to bare the blade. When Gwrhyn looked at me for the first time I was stunned at the intelligence in his eyes. It was like he knew me, and more than that, like he approved of me.

"Luv," Mac said softly. "Why don't you sit down?"

Still shaken by what I'd seen in the wolf's eyes, I sat on the edge of the bed, taking my hand from the hilt of the knife. I knew now without a doubt that the wolf would never harm Mac, so I sat back against the headboard and relaxed a bit.

They continued to mindspeak for a while, then Gwrhyn went to the bookcase and nosed one of the thick volumes on a lower shelf. Mac went over and got the book, looking through it for a moment before talking to the wolf some more. I was just wondering if I should leave the two of them alone when Mac put an end to the conversation.

"Blah, blah, blah," he said dryly, pointing at the door. "Out, I need to explain things."

One moment the wolf was there, and the next it wasn't. I blinked a few times to make sure I wasn't just seeing things, but it was gone.

Mac turned to me and smiled. "Good morning."

I smiled back, happy to hear him say the two words that had begun our nightly discussions while he was a vampire. "It's actually morning, unlike the last time we had this conversation."

"That's one argument I'm not going to miss," he said as he came over and sat down next to me on the bed.

Holding my hand he explained that he'd come back human, but not a mage this time. When he'd been embraced his avatar had been shattered, and there was no way to bring it back. Someone apparently seemed to think he still needed powers and guidance, so the wolf had been sent to teach him how to use a different kind of magic, and guide him to his destiny.

"Beautiful," I murmured dryly. "Just can't have a normal life, can we?" Normal or not I was damned glad that Mac would have some kind of protection from the evils of the world, more than I'd be able to give him, especially if he couldn't use magic anymore.

He smiled and leaned over to kiss me. "We'll see what we can do."

After he dressed, we made our way to the kitchen so that he could eat. The wolf was there, eating a freshly cooked steak and fried potatoes. Eddie was eating a much smaller piece of meat nearby. I crouched down to pet the puppy as he ate, talking softly to him.

"You named the dog Eddie?" he asked when I joined him at the table. "Why?"

"Eddie helped me get away when—when they were leaving Edinburgh," I told him honestly. "If he hadn't, I'd be in Salem right now, probably locked up in the dungeon, or dead."

"They wouldn't have locked you up," he protested softly. "They would have—"

"Given me to someone else," I interrupted. "Yeah, I got that offer." I shook my head and thanked whatever gods were out there that I'd chosen not to return to the Tremere. "Nah, if someone had tried to bite me, I would have gone postal. They'd have had no choice but to put me down, and I'd have—"

I stopped when Mac's face went tight. I should have known better than to talk about it here, in front of his family. I mean, Glenn and Siofra knew, but Mac didn't know that, and I didn't think he wanted everyone to know that if I died I'd rise up a hungry vamp with the sunset. I sure as hell didn't want everyone to know.

Looking away, I decided a change of subject was best. "So, what does the wolf eat?" I asked. "Besides steak, cause that could get expensive."

The conversation moved on to other things, for which I was grateful. I called Gladys and let her know that something had come up and that I needed to take a week off, maybe two, but that I'd be back as soon as I could. She was cool with it, which was good. With the way the wolf was downing the steak, the grocery bill would be sky high once we got back to the island.

FAMILY REUNION

BO: I HEARD HE WAS DEAD ONCE.

MAC: YEAH, WELL, NOBODY'S PERFECT, BO.

BABYLON 5 - A VIEW FROM THE GALLERY

Corrine called the house just after lunch when Mac and I had gone out for a walk. Alaster found us after he talked to her and told us that she'd be coming very soon, bringing clothing and such to stay for a few days. He hadn't told her anything about Mac being back, he knew that it wasn't something she'd believe without seeing proof.

When she stepped through the portal into the kitchen I was standing near the table waiting for her. Alaster and Noinen were with me, and Eddie and the wolf were near the doorway to the living room. The others were in the living room waiting for me to break the news. I took her into my arms and held her close, knowing that I couldn't hide the happiness that I felt now that Mac was back.

She looked confused. "Okay, why is everyone grinning like they know some big secret?" she demanded softly. "What's going on?"

I glanced at Mac's parents, but I knew this was something I wanted to do myself. Leading her over to the table, I said, "Sit down, luv, I have something to tell you that I know you're going to have a hard time believing."

Gwrhyr had come over and sniffed at Corrine as we went to sit down before going through the doorway, passing Siofra who was on her way in.

"Hopefully she won't faint," Siofra teased with a smile as she came in. I couldn't help but blush at the reminder of my reaction to Mac's return. "How are you doing, Corrine?" she asked as she joined us and kissed Corrine on the cheek.

"Fine, thank you," she replied, putting a hand on Siofra's shoulder and patting it gently. "How about yourself?" Siofra smiled in return as we all sat down at the table. Corrine looked at each of us in turn, and nearly laughed at the look on our faces. "What is going on?"

This was it, now I just had to find the words. "Look, sometimes things just happen that we don't have an explanation for," I said at last, reaching across the table to take her hand in mine. "Things that at first just don't seem possible, but for real now, they do happen. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Maybe she didn't, she still looked really confused. "Not really," she said slowly. "Why don't you just tell me what's happened."

I took a deep breath and plunged in the best way I could. "Siofra did something when she was younger that didn't exactly work the way she wanted it to. When Mac died, the spell was triggered. Mac and Angus, well, they came back."

"What do you mean they're back?" she demanded, looking at us all like she thought we were losing our minds.

"They're back," I repeated softly. "They're here. I wouldn't lie to you, Corrine, Mac is alive."

Her face went blank and without a word she stood up and turned toward the living room. I smiled when I saw Mac standing in the doorway, big as life, with the wolf at his feet.

Angus nudged Mac out of the way and came into the kitchen to get a good look at Corrine. "Is this the wee one you've been hiding all these years?" he asked with a grin in his thick Irish brogue. "She's prettier than Stephen, isn't she?"

"That she is," Mac said softly, still waiting for our daughter's reaction. "Hello, Corrine."

She finally let go of the chair and took a hesitant step toward him. "Mac?"

He walked across the room to stand right in front of her, reaching out to put his hands on her upper arms. "You're not going to faint, are you, luv?" he asks with a smile.

She put her hand a hand on his arm and the other on first his chest, then his face. "I don't understand," she murmured.

He pulled her into his arms. "I'm not sure I do either, but right now it doesn't matter. I'm here."

He held her for a long time while she cried tears of relief. I could hear him whispering to her, soft words of reassurance, until she got a hold of herself and pulled back, wiping her eyes.

"I'm sorry to be such a big baby," she said, sniffing a little.

"At least you didn't faint," he said with a grin as he helped her wipe the last of her tears away. Then he turned to Angus. "Corrine, this sorry excuse of a werewolf is your Uncle Angus."

The werewolf came over to give her a hug. "Hello, Corrine Mackenzie."

"Uncle Angus," she said softly. "I'm so glad to meet you." As she pulled away, she looked around the room. "Is Stephen here? Aunt Cara?"

And suddenly everyone was crowded into the room, Stephen, Cara, Glenn, Ian, and everyone else, including Gwrhryr and Eddie. Happy hugs ensued with everyone giving and receiving. The family was together again, complete for the first time in twenty years.

After everyone settled down to the table for tea or coffee, Corrine finally got around to asking what had happened.

Alaster shot a half reproachful, half grateful look at Siofra. "It seems someone was determined not to lose her brothers," he answered gently. "The spell was a little too advanced for her at the time, but I find I can't reprimand her for trying it, not when I've got my boys back." He beamed at the two men, obviously overjoyed to have them back. "They showed up at the house here yesterday morning, a bit cold but none the worse for their trials, for the most part." At that he gave Mac a worried look, but he hid it quickly enough.

I could understand Alaster's worry, for I shared it. If someone had thought it was important enough for Mac to survive that they'd sent the wolf to teach him magic again, his destiny was probably going to be a tough one to live through.

Mac interrupted my thoughts by answering Corrine's question about the wolf. "He's here to guide me to my destiny, or some such," he said dryly as he looked at animal. "Say hello to my daughter, Gwrhryr."

The wolf walked over and raised a paw to shake Corrine's hand. It didn't take long to realize that he could talk to her too, which didn't surprise me. She was a mage, and the wolf had been able to talk to all the other magi in the house, and the werewolves as well.

It turned out that the wolf could talk to Mac any time he wanted to, and any mage or werewolf without a problem. It was frustrating when I realized I was the only one who couldn't talk to it at all. Gwrhryr could get his point across to me easily enough, much like a very intelligent dog, but he seemed as frustrated as I was by our lack of communication.

Alaster ended up solving the problem a few days later by giving me a silver chain with a wolf pendant. I thought it was just a pretty gift, at first, until he explained that it would let me talk to Gwrhryr. He also told me that the necklace had a ward against vampires on it. I thanked him for his thoughtful gift, hoping that I'd never need the ward, but knowing that someday I probably would.

LIFE GOES ON

I'LL MAKE A WISH THIS DAY
AND I'LL SEND IT TO THE HEAVENS
THE CORRS - HOPELESSLY ADDICTED

Later that night we all kept Mac and Angus' date at the pub, even their parents, although we left Eddie at home and the wolf stayed outside the bar. It was good to see Mac drink as if he enjoyed it, and even the five o'clock shadow on his jaw was dear to me. I'd gotten so used to him being a vampire that seeing him like this was like getting to know him all over again.

During our first week in Ireland, Glenn took Mac and me to the island so I could get more clothes and dog food for Eddie. The animals came with us, of course, and Gwrhyr seemed very interested in checking out every inch of the house.

I was a little concerned that Mac wouldn't like our new home, but he seemed comfortable enough in it. Almost too comfortable, in fact. It was almost like he'd been there before. I noticed it first when he turned on an oddly placed light switch without looking to see where it was. After that I started watching him a little closer.

Maybe it was underhanded of me to ask him to get my favorite pajamas for me, but when he went right to the drawer they were in I knew I hadn't been imagining things. Just to test his knowledge of the house further, I asked him to get the dog food, and he knew right here that was too.

I stopped and looked at him questioningly. "How did you know where that was?"

He tapped the side of his head with a grin. "I just know you luv."

It could have been that, I supposed, so I let the matter drop and finished packing.

When we had everything gathered in the living room, I reached up to take off my necklace. "I've got your ring, Mac," I said as I took it off the chain and handed it to him. To my surprise he put it in his pocket rather than on his finger. "You're not going to wear it?" I asked.

He just smiled and said, "Not yet." Turning to Glenn, he gestured for the mage to open the gateway again. By the time it was open, I had the chain back on and was picking up Eddie for the trip back to Ireland.

Though I'd tried to stop him, Mac had been talking up my fighting skills, and his brother was determined to find out just how good I was. It had been a while since I'd fought anything, and with Mac to protect, I knew I had to get back in the game. Finally I let Angus talk me into sparring late on the day before Corrine returned to Salem.

The match started with me stumbling backward after Angus landed a hit on my jaw. It might have hurt, if I'd been human. "Take it easy on me, all right?" I said with a smile. "It's been about three months since I threw down."

"That's some kind of record for you, isn't it?" Mac asked from the deck.

I smiled but kept my eyes on my opponent. "Yeah, it is."

"Have you been working out?" Angus asked. He seemed a little frustrated that his blow hadn't really hurt me, but pleased that he'd managed to land a blow right away.

"Well, yeah, I gotta be prepared, you know?" I replied.

He seemed a little surprised at my answer because he lowered his hands a little. "For what?"

I almost said the truth, that I had to be prepared for when the Tremere found me, but I couldn't put a damper on the lightheartedness of the day like that, so I just grinned. "Fighting werewolves," I answered.

"Just don't hurt Angus," Mac called to me sternly. When Angus laughed, his voice took on a harder note. "Don't hurt her either."

There are some who'd say that Angus cheated in order to beat me, but I wouldn't agree. For real now, he did shift to Crinos form, looming above me at over ten feet tall. His fur looked red in the sunlight, and even though he looked like a wolf on steroids, he still grinned down at me real friendly like.

It's hard to beat a werewolf in Crinos form without trying to kill it, especially with no weapons. I might have beat him if I'd had the silver knife I'd left at home under my pillow, but I'd made a practice never to bring it to Ireland with me because it bothered Cara and Stephen. As it was, he left me a little bruised but no worse for wear.

Stephen wasn't quite as tall as Angus in big furry form, and his pelt was mostly black, with a blazing white cross on his chest. Cara had dark brown fur when she let the wolf inside loose, but was smaller and prettier than either of them, if you reckon a tall hairy monster pretty.

Of course they were careful not to hurt me too badly, but I ended up with more than a few bruises from the afternoon. I considered them worth it mostly because afterward I knew exactly how much out of shape I'd let myself get. Sure, I'd been working out, but it wasn't the same as fighting against an opponent.

I was rubbing a spot on my ribs that Stephen had landed a particularly strong kick to when Mac came toward me. "My turn," he said with a smile.

I just shook my head. "I need a bit of a break. Thirsty." I could feel his eyes on me as I walked toward the house, but I kept going. There was no way in hell I was fighting Mac now that he was human. One misplaced blow would send him back to the grave, and I wasn't going to risk it, no matter what he thought.

"I'll take you on, Macalister," Angus said as he stepped off the patio. "It's time for me to wipe the dirt with your carcass like I did when we were wee bairns."

It took all I had not to step in and forbid them to fight, but I knew that they wouldn't listen to me so I kept my mouth shut. That didn't stop me from watching them, wincing with every blow Mac took as if they'd fallen on me. The brothers were pretty well matched for the most part, but if Angus had shifted to big furry and been serious about hurting Mac, there would have been no saving him.

Mac spent a lot of time with the wolf, those first couple of weeks. While I didn't want to let him out of my sight, I knew that they needed time alone for Mac to get his abilities down. They spent a lot of time at the point, and I spent a lot of time nearby, close enough to see him, but far enough away that I didn't intrude on their training sessions. It was kinda boring, anyway, since they communicated silently, but that didn't stop me from being there.

He never missed a sunrise either, something that got to be a habit by the time we went home. I went with him nearly every day. For a while it was hard to believe that having him back was real, but I got used to it, eventually. I figured even if it wasn't real, it was better than what I had, right?

I suppose I didn't really get used to the fact he was back until we had our first 'discussion'. It was something I wouldn't have thought he'd have gotten that upset about, but looking back I can see why he had.

"The family's looking for a way to reverse the Curse Belated," he told me one evening after Corrine had gone home.

I blinked at him in surprise. "It was a Tremere ritual," I reminded him. "Don't you need a Tremere to reverse it?"

"Glenn told me some time ago that he could undo some of the Tremere rituals," he replied softly. "I'm not sure if they can do it, but they're going to try and find a way. Da has some powerful friends; he's going to ask for their advice as well."

That meant more magic done on me, and I wasn't sure I liked the idea. "Why are you so dead set on revoking this curse?" I asked irritably. "You were the one hot to have it done to begin with, remember?"

"I thought it was what you would want," he replied coolly. "Am I wrong?"

For a moment I let myself think about how close I'd come to slitting my wrists and becoming a vampire when he had died. It would have been an easy way out, death without the actual end of existence part, and it had been way too tempting. "What I want isn't the issue here. Part of your argument was that if I died, at least I'd come back and we'd still be together. Change your mind while you were—?"

He finished the thought I couldn't bring myself to. "Dead?" he demanded with a raised eyebrow. "No, I changed my mind when I lived. If you come back with my vamp blood, you won't remember me, or Corrine." His voice started getting louder, surprising me with the strength of his anger. "And if you 'wake' up by one of us with just that one drop of blood in your system, do you really think you're going to try and remember if we're friend or foe before you feed?! No!" he yelled at me. "I've been there! Try holding a total stranger whose only offense was being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Normally I wouldn't have taken this from him without a bit of yelling myself, but now I just wanted to cry. It didn't help that I'd thought along the same lines myself, wondering what would happen if I woke up among family in a frenzy of hunger.

He took a shaking breath to catch himself, then added so softly I had to strain to hear him, "I may remember everything now, but sometimes I wish I could forget what I was. What I did. I've 'fed' enough for all of us."

I'd known all my life that vampires hurt people, killed them, but he'd never showed any remorse for what he'd been before now. It was an effort not to cry as I went to him and took him into my arms. "That's over now, luv," I whispered soothingly. "Everything is different now. This is your chance to start over."

"This is *our* chance to start over," he corrected, turning his head and kissing me softly.

I pulled back a little to look into his eyes. "I don't want to risk hurting you, not ever," I said honestly as he tucked my hair behind my ear, although I would have said anything at that point to make him feel better. "We'll find a way to break the curse."

Apparently Mac's yelling had been loud enough to concern the parents, because his father knocked on the door wanting to make sure everything was all right. Mac assured him it was and I hoped he was right.

Breakfast the next day was uncomfortable for me mostly because I was embarrassed that we'd been overheard. James had assumed our 'discussions' were normal and had never thought anything about the times we'd raised our voices at each other. Alaster didn't say anything, but he watched us closely until he seemed assured that everything really was all right between us.

Alaster's friends visited a few days later. Braden Murray was the oldest, though Rearden Driskoll didn't seem much younger. Rearden's wife Eileen looked little older than Noinen did, with long red hair that shone in the sunlight the day they walked through a portal into the farmyard.

They spent most of the afternoon poking and prodding me with magic until I wanted nothing more than to get away from them. They all seemed fascinated with the fact I was a dhampyr, and was a lot of 'Hmmm's and 'Fascinating's going on while they discussed my less than noble parentage. When they finally left me alone it took a match with Angus to clear my head and cool my temper.

At the end of the second week in Ireland Mac agreed that it was time for us to go back to the island. I had my job to get back to, and he had fair control over his new abilities. We could tell Alaster and Noinen didn't want us to go, but we couldn't stay in Ireland forever. It was time to go home.

HOME AT LAST

I CAN'T LIVE A NORMAL LIFE
I WAS RAISED BY THE STRIP
COOLIO - GANGSTA'S PARADISE

Our first day home we sat watching the sun go down on a hill about 200 yards from the house. Other than the house, the hill was the high spot on the property. There was brush here and there near where we sat and lots of wildflower, making the area very beautiful.

"What made you choose this island?" Mac asked as the sun touched the horizon.

"I know it seems kinda cheesy," I admitted, looking down at my hands. "I just—I don't know, I wanted to feel normal for a change."

"Nothing wrong with that, luv." He tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "I like it, it's peaceful here."

I smiled in relief. "Siofra thought so too. They thought I should get away and I thought maybe they were right," I explained. "They did a little spooky boo to raise some cash, and we found this. Out of the way, lots of privacy, and no vampires." At his skeptical look, I said, "What, did you think I'd start hunting again? Mac, you proved that not all vampires are like Kate. Besides, if I'd started hunting, the Tremere would have found me, sooner or later. At least this way I got to have a little peace and quiet."

"You're right," he agreed with a smile. "We've had enough violence, it's time to live and let live."

I leaned my head on his shoulder and didn't say anything about the doubts I had. We could live and let live, but I seriously doubted the Tremere would. I pushed thoughts of them out of my mind and focused on the present, where Mac was with me, and we were happy.

Mac got started fixing up the place the next day while I went back to work. The first thing he did was put in the dog door I'd bought but never got around to installing, making sure that it was big enough for Gwrhyr.

The wolf was well behaved for the most part, but sometimes he did things that were so wickedly obvious not what a wolf would do. We managed to cover his mistakes, for the most part, and explain to him what he'd done wrong. The hardest thing to explain was him eating people food, but dog food made him sick, so there was no help for it.

Thankfully Eddie got used to both Mac and the wolf quickly enough, although he didn't much like sleeping on the floor at first. He cried and whined, but eventually he started curling up next to Gwrhyr at night.

There had been some money left over from my trip to Atlantic City with the Johnson's and though I'd been hesitant to use it Mac thought we should, for improvements to the house and the security system. Surprisingly, there was even enough money to put a side car on the motorcycle so the animals could ride with us, and a small boat that Mac named 'Daisy' we could use to reach the mainland.

He replaced the outdated alarm system with one that included motion and thermal sensors, and was tied to the local police department. Around the house he laid out rock gardens with stones small enough for him to move with the Psychokinesis he'd developed, and large enough to be deadly when he got better at it. I added thorny plants to the rock gardens knowing that intruders would be more likely to go around than through them.

Glenn and Angus helped us install the stronger gate at the end of the drive, the chain link fence around the property, and the more decorative stone and wrought iron fence closer to

the house. Between the two fences and the hidden dry moat we dug between them, it would be nearly impossible to reach the house from the road without taking the driveway. The fences were open to the beach, but we put in wide a wooden boardwalk in the sand on which Alaster set a ward against vampires. In fact, he warded nearly everything on our land from the fences to the buildings themselves.

The sheriff stopped by one afternoon to visit while Mac and I were alone working on the perimeter fence. I thought my heart would stop beating when the black and white Blazer pulled up to the end of the drive. I'd met the sheriff when I first came to the island and he'd seemed likeable enough, but that afternoon it took me a minute to convince myself that there was no reason for him to be suspicious of us.

"Afternoon, Beth," he said as he walked over to us. He held his hand out to Mac in greeting. "I'm Cliff Hammond, the sheriff on the island."

"Brendan McAllister," Mac answered as he shook the sheriff's hand. "But most people call me Mac."

"Mac," he repeated with a smile. After some small talk, he commented, "Quite a fence you're building there. Keeping something in or out?"

Mac gestured toward Gwrhyr, who was laying in the shade with Eddie. "The wolf can be a bit frightening to those not used to him," he replied. "Just wanting to keep the neighbors happy."

Turned out the wolf was the reason for the sheriff's visit. Someone had seen Gwrhyr and was worried about having a wild animal on the island. It didn't take much to convince the sheriff that Gwrhyr was tame. I was thankful that Mac had talked the wolf into wearing a collar and a dog's license.

Cliff and Mac ended up talking for a while about lots of things. They got on so well in fact, and the sheriff started coming out to the house a couple of nights a week for coffee after dinner.

Mac spent a lot of time on the hill with Gwrhyr when he wasn't working on our defenses. He'd hike over there with a stack of books and practice his new powers with the wolf watching his every move. I watched too while I worked out in the courtyard, or gardened in the beds around the house. I knew I was being a little over protective, but I couldn't help myself.

Mac didn't like to talk about what it was like when he was dead. Whenever the subject came up he went quiet, withdrew. I knew that when he was ready to talk about it he would. In the mean time, his avoidance of the subject just meant I could avoid talking about what it had been like for me when he was dead. I didn't like remembering how completely I'd lost it when Glenn had rescued me from the Tremere, and I wanted to forget the infection the demon's blood had given me altogether.

We visited Nashville and Ireland a lot once Glenn and Alaster installed permanent gateways between our houses. One word changed the door to our kitchen into a doorway into one of theirs. They set it up to work for Corrine's apartment too, but she visited us much more often than we did her. I didn't want to take the chance that the Tremere would find out Mac was alive again.

I sparred with the werewolves when they visited, and Glenn sometimes, but I always came up with an excuse not to fight Mac, or Corrine. I didn't mind showing them a few things, but I avoided any kind of all out brawling because I didn't want to hurt either one of them.

Mac knew he couldn't beat Angus, but they wrestled anyway for the exercise. I liked it better when he fought with Glenn; without using magic they were pretty evenly matched. I

always held my breath when Mac fought his brother, but Angus was careful with him, and never hurt him worse than a few scrapes and bruises.

For all that Angus was a jokester, there were times when he was even more quiet than Mac. I talked to Cara about it once. She was as worried about him as I was about Mac, but we both hoped that they'd come out of it in time.

SOME KIND OF PEACE

I WILL FIND JOY IN MY HEART
WITH YOU I WILL REACH HEAVEN
THERE WILL BE PEACE
SARAH BRIGHTMAN - ONLY WITH YOU

As time went on it became wicked obvious to me that Mac knew more about the house and where things were in it than he should have, even given that he had the run of it while I was working. One day he found a knife that I'd forgotten where I'd stashed and I finally had to ask how he seemed to know where everything was.

"I told you luv, I just know you," he grinned, and not very convincingly.

"For real now, cut the bullshit," I said impatiently. "It's like you helped me put everything away, or did it yourself. It's creepy."

He turned away. "Sorry."

"That's not an answer, Mac," I snapped back, moving so I could see his face again. "Why are you avoiding this?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said in a low voice.

There was something hurt in his face that I couldn't identify, something pained beneath his expression that I couldn't understand. I almost, almost demanded that he tell me what was hurting him so much, but in the end I couldn't do it. I knew it should be enough that he was here with me, but it wasn't. I wanted all of my lover, all of his joy and all of his pain, and it hurt more than I would have thought possible that he wouldn't give it to me.

The fine line of my temper stretched thin but I managed to bring it under control, if barely. I couldn't stay in the house with him any longer without losing my temper. I laid the knife down on the counter with more force than I intended simply because I knew if I held it any longer I'd throw it at him. "Fine," I bit out before turning to walk toward the door.

His voice stopped me before I took two steps. "Luv, wait."

I waited but didn't turn around. I didn't know if I could hold on to my temper if I looked at him and saw the pain in his eyes again, pain he wouldn't share with me.

"Please try to understand how hard it was for me to—" His voice broke, and my heart did too at the emotion in his words. When he spoke again his voice was so low I almost didn't hear it. "It was almost unbearable."

I closed my eyes to stop the tears from forming. "Do you think it was any better for me?" I demanded softly. It was an effort to speak without yelling at him, but somehow I managed. "Do you think it was easy for me to go on I—" I couldn't get the word out, I couldn't lie to him, especially about this. I'd survived his death, but I sure as hell hadn't lived through it.

I took a deep breath and turned to look at him. "I can't help but wonder what it was like for you, where you were, what you saw," I told him as evenly as I could. I wanted to say more, to ask he'd really been there with me all that time, but the pain in his eyes was too much for me to take. "But if it makes it easier for you not to talk about it, then we won't."

"You want to know where I was? What I saw?" he demanded, his voice low and controlled at first like the vampire Cormac I'd found that night in Salem, but as he began to lose control his words got louder until he was yelling at me. "Look over your left shoulder. That's where I was for over a month near as I could figure time when I was dead. I saw you!"

So I'd been right, all those times I'd felt him in the months he was dead. He really had been there. When I thought of all the things I'd said and done during those first few weeks after his death and how hard it must have been for him to watch I couldn't hide the tears in my eyes and they seemed to help him gain a bit of control.

He turned away, hiding his face from me, but not his pain, not this time. "I saw your sorrow, your grief. What do you think I am talking about? Death being unbearable?" he demanded harshly. "No! I am talking about watching you and not being able to help you, to go to you, touch you, hold you, tell you 'I love you' one last time."

He took a deep shuddering breath before turning back to look at me. The stark agony in his eyes was more than enough to make my tears run like rain. I had to bite my lip to stop from completely breaking down.

"I thought I was in Hell," he told me. "Damned to watch you suffer for all eternity, to see you get on with your life." I could see the remains of his control slipping away as he took one step toward me, almost as if he were afraid I would turn away from his emotions. "You wanna know how I know where everything in the house is?! Because I watched you move in! Watched you move on!"

The harsh sound of choked laughter broke from my lips. "You may have watched me move in here, luv, but if you think you watched me move on, then you weren't really watching," I told him softly as I crossed the room to stand close to him. "I never stopped thinking about you, wanting to be with you. I wasn't living." I reached up to touch the cool skin of his face that warmed under my touch. "It didn't matter that I was still breathing, that my heart still beat. I died when you died; there is no life without you."

He opened his mouth to speak but words seemed to fail him. He shook his head and leaned down to kiss my waiting lips. I'd never felt so close to him, so much a part of him. Even though he'd seen me at my pitiful worst, I knew that he loved me anyway. I clung to him as if I needed him to survive because the truth was that I did. His strong arms held me gently, and I knew that I would always be safe with him, no matter what had happened in the past or what trouble the future would bring.

Much later we lay together quietly in our bed, listening to the sounds of our breathing return to normal. It felt natural now to hear him breathe, to feel the pulse of his blood against my skin, to know that the sweat drying on my body wasn't mine alone. As much as it hurt to think about the months that I'd been without him that pain had been worth going through so that we could have this again.

It wasn't until we were eating dinner later that evening when I realized he was upset with me and why.

"Why are you holding back from me?" he asked softly.

At first I didn't see how he could ask that question. "What do you mean?"

"There was a time not too long ago that there'd be stake in the wall from an argument like the one we had earlier," he reminded me. "Not that I don't appreciate the control, 'cause patching holes gets expensive, but..."

A memory flashed through my mind of a morning twenty years ago when I'd come close to killing Glenn in a fit of fury. How could I tell Mac that I couldn't bear the thought of hurting him with my anger? It had been different, before. As a mage he could have healed his wound with a moment's concentration. As a vampire he could have pulled out the stake and healed the damage with his blood. Now that he was human again, fragile, mortal, I couldn't, wouldn't take the chance of hurting him, not even a little bit, not ever. "Don't you think it's time I stopped throwing things and started handling things like an adult?"

"I fell in love with the stake throwing you," he said with a grin, "both times. It didn't bother me then, it won't now."

I couldn't help but smile, but it didn't last. I looked down at my hands, hating the monster inside of me, hating the fact that if I didn't keep it chained I would hurt Mac, maybe even kill him. I knew I wouldn't survive his death, not again. "It bothers me. I hate losing control. What if my aim is off, or I lose it completely and really hurt you? You couldn't—" I stopped and shook my head in self-disgust. I didn't even want to think about what could happen if the beast took over.

"Throwing that stake helps you keep control," he said gently. "It releases your initial anger and helps you work through the problem."

For real now, he was right. Throwing things always made me feel better, helped me vent without hurting anyone. But he was wrong too. "I'm almost 50 years old," I reminded him, "it's time I learned how to control my temper."

"But I love your temper," he protested. "It's part of your passion."

"I don't need to throw stakes to be passionate, Mac," I said with a slow smile, remembering our lovemaking. "You should know that by now."

I knew I was avoiding the issue, but there was no denying that if I didn't control my temper I could hurt him real fucking badly. I'd keep my temper under control if I had to hold onto it by my fingernails.

"Still," he insisted, "it isn't healthy."

"It's healthier for you," I replied softly. Hell, I'd been able to take him easily when he'd been a vamp, as a human he'd have no chance against me.

"But not for you. I don't like you holding back."

I just shrugged. My health wasn't the issue here, not for me. "It won't kill me."

Though he let the subject drop, it was one he brought up from time to time. I stuck to my guns and held on to my temper, although it was a close thing at times. When he made me mad I'd walk away, go jogging on the beach, or work out in the garage for a while until I cooled off enough to face him without the urge to throw things. It was hard, but like I'd told him, it wouldn't kill me.

BREATHING LIFE

WE WOULD BE NORMAL. WE WOULD HAVE LIVES. WE WOULD BE ABLE TO WALK AND LIVE AND WORK AMONG NORMALS WITHOUT FEAR OF PERSECUTION. . . .

BABYLON 5 - SECRETS OF THE SOUL

It seemed like we'd just settled into a good routine when Mac started thinking seriously about finding a job. He talked to Glenn about papers and documentation, and had planned on visiting the sheriff in Broadwater to talk about employment, but that became unnecessary when Cliff showed up one afternoon.

Cliff had visited several times in the weeks Mac had come to the island, and while I can't say I trusted him, my heart didn't go nuts when his Blazer pulled up to the house anymore. Mac sat with him in the courtyard while I went in to get the coffee. While I was waiting for it to brew, I listened to their conversation through the open window.

"I don't mean to pry, but Beth seems a bit protective of your health," Cliff said softly, keeping his voice down so I wouldn't overhear him. Slim chance, since I had heightened my hearing just to make sure I could. "Were you sick before you moved here?"

"Yes," Mac told him calmly. "It was an exotic illness, but I am completely free of it now."

"Must have been pretty serious," he replied. "She'll come around, once she realizes you're not going to die on her."

I could hear the smirk in Mac's voice when he said, "I hope so."

They talked about the fence, and Gwrhyr, and other trivial things before Cliff got down to what he'd come out to the house for. "What do you plan to do with yourself once you're done landscaping?"

"Well, I suppose I'll need to find a job," Mac admitted as if he hadn't planned on this route for days. "Got any openings?"

"Could be, in a couple of weeks," Cliff said slowly. "Tom's got an offer from a place near Baltimore. If he takes it, we'll need someone to take up the slack. Interested?"

To his credit, Mac didn't sound too smug when he said yes. "Whereabouts near Baltimore?"

"Lansdowne. It's a good move for him, I hope he takes it." Cliff paused for a moment before asking, "Where did you say you worked before you moved here?"

"I did a few years of freelance work in Salem, L.A., Baltimore, Vegas," he replied smoothly. "Kinda moved around with the work. Did most of my training in Ireland though, fishing town farm boy and Irish Republican Army. Got out of there before I got caught up in the Belfast Battles and came US way looking for my 'destiny' or some such." His voice took on the sarcastic tone it always did when he talked about fate.

As I brought the coffee out, they continued to talk about Mac's experience, and whether or not he planned on staying on Hog Island. By the time the coffee was gone it was a done deal. Mac started a few weeks later when Tom and his wife left the island.

Corrine didn't visit as often as we liked, coming to the island every three weeks or so to spend the night. She said she didn't want to be a nuisance, but she never was. We knew she was busy with school and her magical training, so we never pushed her to come more often.

When she did come she did her best to teach me how to cook. She also talked to Mac about security, and even let him teach her how to shoot. She picked it up easier than I did, and even let me show her some about fighting hand to hand. No, it wasn't what your normal family did on Friday night, but we were together as a family, and that was all I cared about.

"I've been thinking about telling mom and dad the truth," Corrine said one morning after breakfast while we were doing dishes.

I was glad Mac had already gone off to work, but I still couldn't stop myself from tensing up. "What were you thinking of saying?"

She shrugged before putting away the mixing bowl she was holding. "I'm not totally sure but I think that they deserve to know the truth, don't you? I mean, they were honest with me the whole time I was growing up, right? About being adopted?" She turned to look at me, a hopeful expression on her face. "I guess I'm asking for your opinion. How do you think they will take it? The whole, unadulterated truth?"

"Mac would say that Knowledge is Power," I replied carefully. "I'd have to ask if you're sure you want them to have that power over you. I'm not saying they couldn't handle it, just that it's a lot for anyone to handle. Remember what it was like when you found out?"

"That's what's holding me back," she admitted sadly. "Uncle Angus said that telling them about Mac and his family would be enough. That way they could at least know each other without being straight about the magic and the werewolves and all that. I'm asking for your opinion on what would be best. Make it a tell all? Or the bare minimum?"

I knew it bothered her to lie to the Wrights, but this was about more than her being honest with them. "I don't know, Corrine. How are you going to explain that Mac came back? What if the Tremere go see them looking for me? I'd hate to have them find him again, God only knows what they would do."

"The Tremere have already been to see them," she told me. I stared at her in surprise, but she continued on. "Hopefully they are satisfied that they don't know anything. I don't know what else to do. Eventually they are going to get suspicious of something or I'm going to slip and mess up the whole story. You know I don't lie very well and Dad said something last time I was home about not seeing me enough."

"You have to do what you think best, Corrine," I told her as I turned away to hide the fear in my eyes. If the Tremere had been to the farm once, they'd be back. "Maybe you should start out with 'here's my birth family' and see how it goes."

She folded the drying towel and hung it on the rack beside the sink. "I'm sorry to put more on you," she said absently. "I'll think about it some more and we'll see what happens, okay? I don't want them in danger and lord knows I don't need a repeat performance of how Brian took the truth. I'm going to my room to read, maybe meditate a little, okay?"

I went to her and laid what I hoped was a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Oh, honey, I'm sure they wouldn't react the way that Brian did. They love you, no matter what you do or what you are, they will always love you, just like I do, like Mac does." She looked so sad I just had to hug her.

"We'll see," she whispered against my hair.

"Luv, don't let your experience with Brian screw you up with everyone," I whispered back. "Just because he couldn't handle it, doesn't mean no one will."

"I know. I just need to figure out what I'm going to do." She pulled back a little and kissed me on the cheek. "I'm going to my room."

Corrine was pretty thoughtful after our talk in the kitchen, but I could see her thinking about it when she thought I wasn't looking. I talked to Mac about our conversation that night, and while he agreed that it wasn't a good idea to tell the Wrights anything right now, he thought that we should wait until she brought it up again before telling her that.

A couple of days later at dinner she brought up the subject again as Mac had said she would, asking if we had any objections to her telling the Wrights that she knew who her birth parents were.

"Were you planning on telling them specifics, or just that you found them?" Mac asked.

"I was thinking about telling them everything," she said hesitantly as she passed me a dish of potatoes. "Well not everything, not yet, but I do want to tell them that I know you and Eliza are my birth parents. And I want to tell them about Grandfather and Grandmother. And about Uncle Angus and Aunt Cara and the others." Her words picked up speed, and she finished in a rush. "I feel like I'm living a double life, especially when I am in Bar Harbor with them. I think they deserve that much, don't you?"

"Corrine, I'm not saying that you shouldn't do this," I told her as logically as I could, "but the Wrights think your birth father is dead. How do you plan to explain that?"

"We could say it was all a misunderstanding," she suggested, reaching for the rolls. She glanced between Mac and me as she continued. "We could say that Eliza thought Mac was dead but that whoever broke into the apartment that night took him away. When he woke up he couldn't remember anything and Eliza thought he was dead. Then you found each other again in Salem. It's mostly the truth and would let them know enough to understand without knowing too much."

"But they think he's dead too," I reminded her. "Didn't you tell them he was back when—" I stopped short and looked at Mac, then down at my plate. I didn't like remember what it had been like when Mac had been dead.

"I did," she said quietly. "We'll have to come up with something to tell them. Two back from the dead stories is pretty incredible, even for us to imagine." I felt her touch my hand and looked up to see that she'd done the same to Mac. "That's why I'm asking for both of you for your help and your support. It's something that I really want to be truthful about with Mom and Dad. I don't want anyone to think that I'm ashamed of them because I haven't introduced everyone."

"It isn't an issue of being ashamed or not, luv," Mac told her. "What if the clan comes to them again looking for us? They have no abilities to protect themselves."

She looked as if he'd smacked her. "I hadn't thought of that. They've already been to the farm once. Do you think they will come back? What if I could find some kind of inhibitor to keep them from even getting onto the farm?"

"You could have a ward placed, but the clan knows how to break them."

"What if grandfather placed it?" she asked pleadingly. "They couldn't get through one that he made, right? He's more powerful than I am. Maybe more powerful than I'll ever be."

He smiled sadly. "If the clan wants in bad enough, they'll figure a way in. They have ghouls, and humans under their sway, and Garou, and Magi."

Her shoulders slumped in defeat, and she stared down at her plate broodingly. "I didn't know they were that powerful. I won't put them in danger. Forget I mentioned it." She grimaced as if the thought of the Tremere had put a bad taste in her mouth. "I'm not really hungry anymore. I think I'll just go for a walk. Excuse me."

"Corrine," I said more sharply than I intended, "sit down and finish your meal. If you want to be treated like an adult, act like one." She eyed me defiantly at that, and I know she didn't like me telling her to act like an adult, but I'd only been speaking the truth. Taking a deep breath, I said softly, "We don't want the Wrights in danger any more than you do. Your fa— Mac is just trying to play devil's advocate. We need to look at the worst case scenario here. We don't want to risk the Tremere finding out that he's alive."

She moved back to the table only to lean against the back of her chair and talk in a harsh but respectful tone. "Let's be honest, worst case scenario is that telling my parents anything puts them in danger, truth or not. So I will have to continue lying to them because there's no telling how or when the all mighty Tremere may or may not get to them. I had an idea they were relentless, based on what both of you have told me, but I never...."

My eyes met Mac's, both of us sad that it had taken this to get Corrine to understand the danger the Tremere could be to those around her. She thought she knew now the depths to which they could go, if they chose to, but she didn't, not really. I prayed that she'd never know what they were capable of.

"There Tremere don't like to lose," I said gently, "and if they had any reason to believe Gene and Martina knew anything, whether they really did or not, they'd want answers. But I don't think they're going to go back and hassle Gene and Martina. I'd have to be stupid to go back there, and Radek would know that. I think they'd look for me elsewhere." I looked back at Mac. "To be honest, realistically your family is in more danger than the Wrights. I've been seen with them in Ireland, and Nashville."

"But my family has the advantage of not being 'normal'," he reminded me.

"Yes, but if they put wards on the farm, then only humans could get through," I said reasonably. "They could handle humans."

"If they ward against Ghouls, then you could not visit," he replied. "If they ward against the Clan's mages, then Corrine could not visit. And they cannot live on the farm forever. They would need to leave sometime."

Now I'd lost my appetite. "God, I hate this. It's bad enough I spent half my life running from the bastards and the other half working for them, why do Gene and Martina have to be in danger just because I try to live a normal life?"

Mac didn't say a word, he just stood up and walked out of the house, taking the Eddie and Gwrhyr with him.

Corrine looked at me uncertainly. "Okay, look. I was wrong to bring any of this up, alright? Just forget about it. The only thing it's accomplished is getting everyone upset. I'm sorry, let's just drop the subject, okay?"

"No, I'm sorry, okay?" I told her, unable to meet her eyes. "Look, why don't you just tell them you know your birth father's family, for now, until we can figure something out? I know how important this is to you, but we can't risk the Tremere finding out Mac is alive again."

"Let's just think about this and try to figure out the best solution," she suggested.

I stood up and went to the window, but Mac was already out of sight. "Yes," I agreed absently. "Sometimes you have to work at things if you want them bad enough. You can't just give up when things go south."

For a moment the room was silent until Corrine started clearing the table.

"But sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't have been better if I'd gone back to them," I said softly, still looking out the window. I heard something drop in the sink and looked over at Corrine's pale face for a moment before turning back to the window. "I can't help it. I know they're going to catch up with me sooner or later, and when they do they're not just going to let Mac go. He was one of them for too long, he knows too much."

"Stop thinking that way," she said firmly. "They aren't going to find you. The only link they have to you is me and I'm not telling them anything. I'm not telling anybody anything about you and Mac living here. It's going to be fine."

"It'd be nice to think that, wouldn't it? And it will be, for a while. But you can't take the burden of our safety on yourself, luv. For real now, the Tremere don't need you to find me. If it takes a hundred years, they'll catch up to me, sooner or later, one way or another." I picked up my cigarettes from the table and lit one, blowing the smoke toward the ceiling and trying not to think about what would happen when they did find me. "The best I can hope is that Mac isn't with me when they do."

"Just remember to not live your whole life waiting for the axe to drop," she said in a nearly emotionless voice. "It's not really living then." She left the room quietly, and a few moments later I watched her walk down to the beach.

I knew I'd upset her, but really, what was I supposed to say? I couldn't lie to her and tell her that Mac and I could ride off into the sunset and the Tremere would just let us go. They would find me, and they would try to take me back. Since I'd die before I went back willingly, I'd become a vampire, and forget everything about my mortal life, including the fact that Mac was alive again.

Pushing those black thoughts out of my mind, I turned back to the dishes waiting in the sink. Corrine was right, I couldn't live my life expecting the Tremere to storm in at any moment. I had to take each day as they came, and be grateful for each one I had left.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

THIS IS THE MOST PROFOUND SPIRITUAL TRUTH I KNOW: THAT EVEN WHEN WE'RE MOST SURE THAT LOVE CAN'T CONQUER ALL, IT SEEMS TO ANYWAY.

ANNE LAMOTT

I woke up early one June morning alone. The sun wasn't up yet, so I knew Mac had gone out to watch the sunrise. I'd seen enough sunrises in the last six months to last a lifetime, but I still hadn't gotten my fill of Mac, so rather than laying there and falling back asleep, I got up.

Before I even hit my feet I realized that the chain I'd kept my wedding rings on were gone. I did a quick search of the bedroom, but when I didn't find it anywhere I threw some shorts on under the tee shirt of Mac's that I'd slept in and went looking for him.

Of course he was on the beach, but to my surprise, Gwrhyr was nowhere to be seen. As I got closer, I saw that he had spread a blanket in the sand, and had brought enough food out for two to have a picnic breakfast, complete with a daisy from the garden. With the sun peaking over the horizon, it made a very romantic picture.

I stopped on the edge of the blanket and smiled down at him. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No," he replied softly. "Just up thinking."

Thinking about food and fun, by the looks of things. I lay down on the blanket and popped a piece of fruit in my mouth. "About what?"

"Security," he said dryly.

I wondered what else he had come up with to protect the house, and I hoped it wasn't too extreme. "I still think the land mines are a bad idea," I told him. "What if Ian wandered into the wrong place? Or one of the kids on the island? It would be kinda hard to explain."

He chuckled a little. "No, I'm past the land mines. I think the house is pretty well set."

"I think we're as secure as we can hope to be," I replied as I reached for more food. "If nothing else we should hear them coming. Give us time to get out."

"Aye, but there are some other areas we could stand to strengthen."

I looked up at him in surprise. "We've built fences, bought a better alarm system, and warded everything against Kindred. What else is there?"

He gave me an even look. "Us."

"You don't think we're training enough?"

A small smile played at the corners of his mouth. "No, I mean us. Are we secure enough?"

"Does this have something to do with my missing necklace?" I asked softly.

His smile turned into a grin. "I was hoping that'd be enough to get you out here." He held the engagement ring up between us and we both looked at it for a long moment. "After all these years, everything it's been through, still as beautiful as the first day I laid eyes on her."

Since he was looking at me I was pretty sure he wasn't talking about the ring. Tears filled my eyes at the honesty in his, but I couldn't agree with him. "I don't know, Mac. It's a little tarnished around the edges, don't you think? A few nicks and scratches here and there from use and battle."

"Nah, those just make her more beautiful," he assured me, "especially to those of us who've got some of the same nicks and scratches." He looked at the ring for a moment. "I think it's about time we did her right, properly." His warm eyes turned back to me. "Don't you?"

It was lame to cry happy tears, but I was so close to doing just that. Just a few months ago I thought I'd never see this man again, and here we were, in the sunshine, talking about getting married. I thanked all the gods I could name that we'd been given another chance at life together.

"Yeah, I think so," I agreed, trying to stay casual about the whole thing so I wouldn't cry. "Third time's a charm, right?"

He turned a bit to get closer to me, and I sat up to meet him half way. "So, what'd ya say?" he asked with a smile.

"I say 'yes', Mac," I grinned back. "When have I ever told you no?"

He slipped the ring on my finger and we kissed there in the early morning sunshine on our own private beach. The food was forgotten for the moment, but we did eat it, eventually.

The entire family was happy to hear that we were finally getting married after all these years. Noinen started planning a huge wedding, but she understood when Mac explained we didn't want anything big. The smaller the better really, since anything else could alert the clan that Mac was back.

Planning even a small wedding was hard work. Corrine insisted that I buy a new dress, though I'd have been happy enough in jeans. Stephen would marry us, of course. Corrine and Siofra agreed to stand up with me, while Mac chose to have Angus and Glenn by his side. Then there were food and flowers and the guest list to plan. The last was the easiest part; family only, which of course included Bobby, his girlfriend Jenna O'Malley, and their son Paul.

A week before the wedding Alaster told us there'd be three more people attending the wedding. His friends Braden, Eileen and Rearden would be joining us since they'd apparently found a way to undo the curse Mac had done on me when he was a vampire. They planned to give us the cure as a wedding present.

Our wedding day couldn't have been more perfect. Mac and I had chosen a place on the cliffs just down from the point to exchange our vows. It was a simple traditional ceremony, except we cut out the 'obey' part. I could stick to the obeying when he was my vampire master; we both knew I wouldn't now that he was human.

The love and happiness shining in Mac's eyes when he we exchanged rings was so much like what I felt inside, I knew I had to cry the happy tears for the both of us. The only thing that saved me was Glenn saying, "About bloody time," after Stephen pronounced us 'Man and Wife'.

The rest of the day went just as smooth as the wedding itself. We did get a bit of teasing when we headed for our room shortly after sundown, but we didn't mind. When the door shut and we were alone for the first time as man and wife, nothing had really changed between us. When everything was said and done, when we touched no one else existed.

NOTHING LEFT TO BLEED

FOR ANYTHING WORTH HAVING ONE MUST PAY A PRICE....
JOHN BURROUGHS

I had to fast all day as part of the cure for the curse Mac had laid on me, drinking only water and some nasty tea Noinen kept giving me. I dealt with it, but it wasn't easy watching everyone else eat like they were starving while I sat there sipping at tea that tasted like dirty socks. I knew it'd be worth it in the end, but it didn't make the tea taste any better.

I did my best to pretend there was nothing worrying me, but I don't think I hid it very well. Corrine started looking a little worried herself and I wanted to talk to her about what was to happen that evening, but I knew she'd insist on being there, and I didn't want that to happen. If I died before the curse was fixed, I'd feed on the first person I could, and I did not want that person to be my daughter. If I could have, I'd have made Mac stay away too, but I knew that wasn't going to happen so I didn't even try.

There was obviously something bothering Noinen when we sat down to afternoon tea. She was uncharacteristically quiet as she and Siofra put everything out on the table, even when Angus tried to tease her into a smile. I hoped it wasn't anything to do with the ritual planned for that evening just after sundown, but I suppose it was too much to hope for. At least the other werewolves were off bonding somewhere, and Alaster's friends were up on the point preparing for the ritual.

"I think you might be sheltering the girl a bit too much," she said to Mac finally as she poured tea into Glenn's cup. "She is a big girl, how do you expect her to learn when no one's telling her anything? The curse is going to be lifted, so what's the point of keeping it from her a few more hours?"

He didn't need to ask who she was talking about, we all knew it was Corrine. "If you think she needs to know, why didn't you tell her?" he asked softly.

"Because this is something you need to do, Macalister, not me," she told him firmly as she sat down at the table next to Alaster. "I won't be telling the poor girl that her father cursed her mother. I know, I know, it was with the best of intentions, but it was a curse all the same."

"Then be na chastising me, if ya willna do it yourself," he said irritably, his voice heavy with his native Irish accent. "I promised her I'd tell her after the curse be lifted, and so I shall. Corinne is every part Brennan, and is as thick in the head as any one o' us when we were her age."

Angus laughed softly, and even Siofra smiled, but Mac wasn't quite done.

"And she's got her mother's patience," he added with a smirk. "She wants all the knowledge, right bloody now. She'll come around, in time, we did."

I frowned into my tea cup. Mac knew I didn't want Corrine to be anywhere near the point tonight, and it was up to him to work things out with his family.

"And when she's wanting to go with us to the point tonight, and you know she will," Noinen demanded, "what would you tell her?"

"No," he said simply. "It worked well enough on most of us."

Angus tried to look innocent, but it was no good. Everyone knew that he'd disobeyed not only the Garou litany by marrying Cara, but his parents' orders.

"Ya spared no rod with me when I followed along after being told not ta, and I wasna much younger than her," Mac continued reasonably. "Being in this family has spoiled her a

wee bit. She has delusions of grandeur, expectin' to be able to do what she wants. She hasna the idea of the patience and time, and discipline it takes to do what we—" he closed his eyes for a brief moment, then said, "—you can do. Spoil her as your granddaughter, but teach her as a Mage. If she will nae have the teachin', then she'll not be needing to take part."

"Don't ya be telling me how to teach a mage, boyo," she shot back, her anger rising. "I did well enough with the ones I taught, yourself among them. And it seems to me I recall one phrase you used quite often: 'Knowledge is power.' Have you forgotten that one?" she challenged. "And I can't help but wonder what power you're trying to keep from the girl, unless it's ashamed you are over what you did to your wife."

He looked away from her at that, unable to meet her eyes. I hadn't realized until that moment how badly Mac felt about doing the curse on me. "Knowledge to make your own decisions," he told her.

"Which you're not letting her do!" Noinen exclaimed.

Alaster laid a hand on her arm to calm her. "Ya know well enough we were sparing on the 'no's when you were growing up, unless it were dire circumstances." At that he looked toward Angus. "Of course some of you never did listen even then. Ya should know that if a child is told 'no' too many times they go off to learning on their own, leaving their family behind. Now if that's what you'll be wanting for the lass, you'd best say so. Otherwise we need to guide her through her lessons. What better way to learn the discipline needed for such magicks then by watching it done?"

"You be messin' with Kindred magicks, magicks that involve Eliza's death. If they go awry—" He stopped for a moment then lowered his voice to say, "Do you really want her to see her mother die?"

Alaster looked at him sadly. "You know we won't be letting that happen."

"Do I?" he demanded. "The only thing certain in life is death."

"And if she does die," Noinen put in, "do ya not think Corrine will believe she could have stopped it if she'd been there to help?"

I might have complained about all this talk of me dying, but Mac stood up slowly and looked at everyone in the room in turn before settling on his parents. When he spoke, his voice was low and slow, with no brogue and tightly controlled emotions.

"I make no argument that you did not do right by us kids." He took a deep breath, but his shoulders slumped sadly. "I wasn't her father for the start of her life; I guess I have no claim now either. I have made my wishes on the matter known. Do as you will, but you will be the ones explaining to her. This is Dreamspeaker magick you are doing and I am one no longer. I go for Eliza tonight and to see my shame put to rest. Not as a teacher or a guide, not as an equal. I pray no harm comes of this night."

I could see the effort it took him to walk calmly out of the room. Biting my tongue to stop from yelling at his parents for upsetting him so badly, I followed him out, hoping that there was something I could do or say to make him feel better, even though I had no idea what that might be. For real now, I could see his parents' point, but a few hours wasn't going to make much of a difference now and besides, I really didn't want Corrine to be there when they undid the curse, especially if things went wrong and I did die.

I grabbed a jacket and followed Mac outside, where he stopped just off the porch and lit a cigarette. I caught up with him and reached for the pack before he could put it away. He gave it and a lighter to me, then put the pack away when I handed it back to him.

We stood there smoking for a few minutes with him half turned away from me. I was pretty sure he wasn't mad at me, but more like he didn't want me to see just how much his family had hurt him.

Men are damned particular when it comes to crying, and it shook me to see him that upset. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't think of anything to make him feel better. In the end I did my best to respect his privacy, turning away and smoking my cigarette in silence. I even took a few steps away so that he could have whatever space he needed to get himself together. I hoped that he'd turn to me if he wanted comfort or tell me to go if he wanted to be alone, but until he did either I was going to stick with him.

I watched him walk off a few minutes later, not sure if he needed time alone more than I needed to be with him. In the end, I thought he probably needed company, someone to take his mind off what was going on in the house. I tossed what was left of my cigarette and headed after him. I caught up quickly, but stayed a little behind him just in case he really didn't want me there.

"You can walk beside me," he said after a moment. "I'm not your master anymore." His tone on the word 'master' was so sarcastic it stung.

A few long strides brought me even with him. I wanted to explain why I'd stayed a step behind, but that would have opened the possibility of him saying he wanted to be alone so I changed the subject instead. "You don't suppose there'll be anything left of your mom's stroganoff later, do you? The werewolves eat like pigs." I could eat after the ritual, as long as nothing went wrong.

"I'm sure if it's gone, we can find you something to eat." He reached for my hand and I took it gratefully.

"I'm starving," I admitted. We walked for a few minutes in silence, then I looked up at him and said softly, "I'm not gonna die."

He didn't look at me. "Do ya know that for sure?"

"I know I'm too damn stubborn to die," I told him firmly, hoping it was true. "I've got things to do."

At least that made him laugh a little. "I hope so. But if that were the case, then why have I died twice?"

"I don't know." I didn't like thinking about that. He was human now, more vulnerable than he'd ever been. I tried to smile and said, "Maybe you're not as stubborn as I am."

"Ya canna die yet anyway," he told me with a smile as we walked along. "We've got a yard just waiting to be filled with wee ones, little Mage and Garou, and all sorts of other things, and I haven't built that picket fence yet."

I laughed for real at the thought of all those kids running around our private corner of the island, playing with Gwrhyr and Eddie and each other. I moved closer to him, relaxing for the first time all day. "See? We've got nothing to worry about. Although I don't know about having a bunch of kids, I doubt I'd have the patience to be a good mom." I looked up at him, admiring his strong face in the bright afternoon sun. "But I know you'd make up for it by being the perfect dad."

He blew me off, but I knew I was right.

We walked through the fields for nearly an hour before the setting sun told us it was time to get ready for the ritual. Thankfully Siofra and Angus had taken Corrine and everyone not involved with the ritual off on a sightseeing tour.

I showered quickly and changed into the long white robe that Noinen had laid on the bed for me trying not to think about what I was preparing for. We walked the path to the point as the sun was setting into the ocean. Surprisingly, I was warm enough in the white robe Noinen had given me to wear, but Mac hadn't changed, except to add a few accessories to his outfit. The pouch was easy enough to notice, although I couldn't tell what was in it, and when I asked he didn't really answer, just squeezed my hand like it was supposed to make me feel better. It might have if I hadn't I noticed the figure eight he'd put on beneath his jacket.

The thought of those guns bothered me a lot, and I found myself wondering who he was planning on using them on if the ritual didn't turn out well. I hated the thought of him using them on me if I died and came back a vampire, but I think I hated the thought of him using them on his family even more. When I finally realized he was also carrying stakes, I thought maybe he planned on using them on his family if they tried to hurt me after I changed. Once I'd had that thought, I couldn't get it out of my head.

Not far from the point I slowed down, and because Mac was holding my hand, he did too. Alaster turned once to make sure we were still coming, and I told him we'd be there soon. When we were alone, I turned to Mac, looking up at him in the dying light of the day. I had a lot to say, but I didn't have any idea where to begin.

"I'm not so good with words, but I've got something to say before we do this thing, so just let me say it," I said at last. I glanced down at the bulge in his jacket and took a deep breath for the courage to say what needed to be said. "We've had a wicked wild ride, you and me, good times and bad times and really bad times," I said with a wry smile that didn't last long, "but I don't regret a minute of the past, Mac, not one, because everything we've done has led us right here, to this moment, and I'm happy here."

I put my hand on his chest. "But if you have to use those guns tonight, I want you to make sure I'm the one you're aiming at. I don't want either one of to have regrets if you thought you had to use them on someone else."

He laid his hand over mine. "The guns are a last resort," he said softly, "if everything else doesn't work out."

"It will," I said firmly, hoping I wasn't lying to him. "It has to, right?" I didn't even want to think about what would happen if something went wrong. I moved closer and rested my cheek against his hand, hoping to hide my fear from him, but knowing I couldn't. "Can't fill that yard with kids if I'm—"

"Enough," he cut in hoarsely. "Let's just get this done shall we?"

I had to agree that thinking about this magic stuff was just making me more nervous. Before I could step back he kissed me softly. I clung to him, hoping that this wasn't the last kiss he'd get from me alive.

The ritual took longer than I'd expected. After some smudging with sage and cleansing of the area, the magi called in the spirits with drums and dance. Lying on my back in the center of the circle I could see them floating around everyone. Some looked like animals, but some looked like they might have been people once. There were so many that the air was thick with them.

After a while some of the spirits separated themselves from the crowd. A wolf, an owl, a man and a woman started hovering toward me, along with something that looked like a mix between a dragon and a cat. They floated to the rhythm of the drumbeats and the dancers moving around me.

I wasn't quite prepared when the wolf dove toward me. I'd been told what to expect, but it was cold, so cold when it slid into my chest. My body jerked as if it had a life of its own, then

spasmed again almost immediately when the spirit flew upward with a thin strand of crimson stuff that looked like blood trailing back to my body.

I lost track of the number of times the five spirits dove into me, one at a time, each time staying inside of me longer and longer. At first I had to make myself lay there and take it, but eventually I was so weak I couldn't have moved if the Tremere had shown up to take me away. I knew they were taking the last of Mac's vampire blood from me, but it seemed like they were taking more than that, they were taking the stuff I used to heal, to become stronger or faster.

I slid into unconsciousness praying Alaster's cure wouldn't kill me.

The next thing I knew there was blood in my mouth, thick and rich and aching familiar. It was Kindred blood, Mac's blood. I gulped it down and might have cried when it was gone if I'd had the energy for tears. I wanted more, I wanted my lover with me, wanted to taste his blood on my tongue again. I got coffee instead. It tasted flat and stale after the richness of the blood. I drank it anyway, hoping it would warm me up because despite the thick blanket someone had laid over me, I was freezing. I floated in some sort of half dream state, wondering where Mac had gone to.

Blood filled my mouth again, tasting all the sweeter after the bitter coffee. I swallowed as quickly as I could and felt its heat warm my stomach. The warmth began to radiate through my body, and more coffee accelerated the effect. With the warmth came thought, or at least the beginnings of thought.

I opened my eyes and saw Mac sitting beside me on the bed, my human husband, not my vampire lover. I reached out to touch him, wanting the reassurance of his warmth. "You're still here," I whispered. Then I remembered something bad had happened, or might have happened. "Am I me?"

His smile held more than a bit of relief. "For better or worse, yes."

"Didn't die then." Somehow I knew I could have.

"No, luv," he answered patiently.

I closed my eyes and turned my head to rub my cheek against the soft pillow. "Someone did."

"No one died, Eliza." I could hear the frown in his voice.

"But there were ghosts," I reminded him. "Ghosts and dragons and guns. No one died?"

"One more, I think," he said softly.

I opened my mouth to ask what he meant, and he popped a marble into my mouth. A moment later I tasted his vampire blood yet again. I swallowed it gratefully, feeling the warmth spread to my arms and legs, making them tingle as if they'd been asleep. When he offered me the coffee this time I was able to hold the cup myself to drink.

"Better?"

"I think so," I agreed gratefully. "Not so fuzzy. Won't be wrestling your brother for a while, but I'm all right."

"Good," he told me as he watched me drink more of the hot coffee. "Gwrhyr is asking Ma to have some food ready for you, if you're hungry."

"I'm starved," I admitted. I'm always hungry when I have to use a lot of blood at once, and now I felt like I had lost every drop of blood I'd ever held in my body. I wondered why it hadn't killed me. Not that it mattered. Now Mac and I had the chance to have those kids he'd talked about.

As he helped me sit on the edge of the bed, I noticed that he'd taken off the weapons he'd been wearing earlier. "Since I've still got a pulse, I guess I don't have to ask if everything went well."

"Not really."

I tried to take the robe off, but couldn't quite manage the coordination. Mac helped me pull it off and then helped me into more comfortable clothing. By the time everyone else came back, we were in the kitchen with Mac's parents and Glenn. Noinen had given us heaping plates of food, and I was well on my way to finishing mine off.

"Hello," Mac said cheerfully when Corrine came into the room holding Ian. "Buy anything good?"

Corrine didn't answer, just stood there watching me eat. My mouth was full, so I smiled at her and waved to Ian, who was peeking at me from nearly closed eyes.

"We didn't buy anything," Siofra said as she followed Corrine into the room.

The girl stood there a moment longer then announced she was taking Ian up to bed before stalking from the room.

I wanted to go after her, but really, what could I say that Mac couldn't say better? If I tried to explain things I'd most likely screw it up. He'd promised to tell her, and he would. I went back to eating, but the food didn't taste quite as good, or maybe I was just getting tired.

Siofra joined us at the table and told us about the tour Angus had taken them on. It sounded boring to me, and like it had been boring for her. I could tell she was dying to ask what had happened while she was gone, but I was too tired to fill her in.

"Everything went well," Alaster assured her. "No problems to speak of."

"I'll tell you all about it later," Glenn added softly, for which I was grateful. I'd lived through the damn ritual, I didn't really want to hear about it.

"I think that we should all get ready and go out for a night on the town," she replied with a smile that included the whole table.

"You all go on with out me," Mac suggested. "I think I'm just going to relax here tonight. Besides, I have a promise to keep," he added with a nod in the direction Corrine had gone.

"I think I'd rather stay in tonight too, I'm a little tired," I said softly as I finished off my plate. "Maybe we could go out tomorrow instead?" Twenty-four hours would go a long way toward boosting my blood supply.

"I guess that's probably a good idea," Siofra admitted. She smiled at her husband. "Since Corrine took Ian up and got him off to bed, would you like to take a walk?"

"I'd like that," he replied, standing up and offering Siofra his hand.

I leaned against Mac as they left us, mostly because I was tired, but also because it brought me closer to his food. He pretended not to notice when I stole bites from his plate. Even after eating the giant helping Noinen had given me I was still hungry.

When Corrine came back down a few minutes later I sat up. She looked worried enough as it was, I didn't want to stress her out any more by letting her see how much the ritual really had taken out of me.

It wasn't until Alaster went to talk to his friends and Noinen began cleaning off the table that Mac suggested Corrine join him for a walk. She agreed quickly, and he gave me a kiss before getting up and following her out of the house. Once they were gone, I stood on unsteady feet and started helping clear the table.

"Oh, no," Noinen said firmly. "You don't need to be helping me tonight. Sit yourself down."

"I'm sorry," I told her as I used the back of a chair for support. "I feel bad making you do this yourself."

"I've no problems doing this," she told me with a smile. "Besides, you've had quite an ordeal tonight. How you're even out of bed is beyond me."

"I was hungry," I said softly, not wanting to admit that Mac had fed me blood. "I'll be all right, I just need some sleep."

"Why don't you do that?" she suggested. "You look like a stiff breeze would blow you over."

I felt like one could too. "I will. Thank you, Noinen, for everything."

She came and hugged me, then held my arm to steady me as I walked back to Mac's room. I assured her I could change and get into bed myself, and she left me in peace. Once I sat down on the bed, I decided that changing would take too much effort. I lay down on the bed and was asleep before I could pull the blankets over me.

SHADOWS AND THE LIGHT

I MUST NOT FEAR. FEAR IS THE MIND-KILLER. FEAR IS THE LITTLE DEATH THAT BRINGS TOTAL OBLITERATION. I WILL FACE MY FEAR. I WILL PERMIT IT TO PASS OVER ME AND THROUGH ME. AND WHEN IT IS GONE PAST I WILL TURN THE INNER EYE TO SEE ITS PATH. WHERE THE FEAR HAS GONE THERE WILL BE NOTHING. ONLY I WILL REMAIN.

FRANK HERBERT - DUNE

Fall passed into winter, and the holidays came and went with much festivity. Mac and I settled into our first year of marriage easily, living as best we could with the shadow of the past hanging over us. We didn't talk about it much, but other than the precautions we took we did our best to pretend that they'd never find us.

There came a day when I couldn't pretend any more.

In late February Mac came home from work in a thoughtful mood. I held my tongue, knowing he'd tell me what was on his mind when he was ready. It didn't take long.

"What do you think of this?" he asked as he handed me a folded piece of paper.

I opened it up only to feel the blood drain from my face as I stared down at two photos of myself. Through my dawning horror I forced myself to read the words written beneath them.

THE DETAILS

Elizabeth "Eliza" Gentry was last seen on January 2, 2001 in Nashville, Tennessee. There is reason to believe that she has traveled to the Boston, Massachusetts area. She is wanted for information she may have concerning a murder. Witnesses say that Gentry is hiding from the killer or killers for her own safety.

Gentry tends to dress in denim or leather. She keeps herself in excellent physical condition and may frequent local gyms. Gentry could be working as a bouncer or a waitress in a bar or nightclub. She is also a devout Catholic and may have sought out a priest or monastery for guidance.

REMARKS

This notice should be distributed to local law enforcement but is not for public release. Gentry is not a suspect at this time, and due to her belief that anyone who approaches her will try to cause her harm she should not be approached. As Gentry is an expert in several martial arts forms and may be armed for her own protection, individuals with information concerning her whereabouts should take no action themselves, but instead immediately contact Jonah Evans or Eddie Lane of the Salem City Police Department.

Somehow I found myself sitting down at the table, my hands clenching the paper almost to the point of ripping it. I knew I should have run. I knew it. I hadn't realized I'd spoken out loud until Mac answered me.

"No," he said calmly. "This shows how much they don't know where you are."

"They'll find me." Panic was setting in hard and fast, and it was getting hard to breathe. "Then they'll find you."

"No," he insisted, pulling a chair close to mine. "They do not know where you are."

"But they will." How could he be so calm? Even the thought of the Tremere finding our haven was enough to make my hands shake. "They'll find me. They'll find us and make us go back."

He took my face gently in his hands and made me look up at him. "Eliza, they are not going to find us." His voice and expression were calm and firm, but I couldn't stop from thinking that the paper in my hand was our death warrant. "And if they do, I won't let them take you or me. I have made every arrangement that I can to keep us safe. Now all we can do is live our lives. Together."

Together. It wasn't fair that we'd finally found some peace in our lives and the Tremere wouldn't leave us be. "They'll kill us if we don't go back," I reminded him. There had to be somewhere we could go, something we could do to get away from them. I couldn't bear it if he died on me, not again. "Maybe we should just run."

"So you're not even going to try and live a normal life?" he asked angrily.

I couldn't stop the near hysterical laughter that broke from my lips. I put my hands on top of his and tried my best to stop their shaking. It wasn't until later that I realized I was still holding that damned piece of paper.

"Every time I think I'm living a 'normal' life, everything crashes and burns remember?! Yo—" Somehow I managed to stop myself from saying more; it wasn't his fault he kept dying on me. "Somebody dies and I'm left standing in the ashes." Tears streamed down my face as I whispered, "I can't do that again, Mac. I can't."

He gathered me close, pulling me into his lap and stroking my hair soothingly. "We'll be okay, I promise," he whispered against my temple. "We've got a family now to look out for us, and us them."

I wanted so badly to believe him, but I just couldn't. Family hadn't saved him from the vamps in Baltimore, hadn't saved him from the demon in Edinburgh. Things were going too good now, there was no way it could last.

But I had a choice to make here, one I thought I'd already made. I could spend the time I had with Mac afraid of everything, jumping at shadows, or I could make the most of whatever time we had together. The Tremere were going to find me sooner or later, it was just a matter of time. Seeing the flier had brought that time closer in my mind, but I still couldn't let it destroy whatever time we had left.

I pulled back with a sniff and wiped the tears from my face. "I lost it, didn't I? I'm sorry." I did the best I could to smile, but it was hard, damned hard. "We've got defenses, and wards and gateways, right? We'll be fine."

"We will," he agreed, sounding more positive than I ever could have. As his lips met mine, I pushed the thought of the Tremere as far to the back of my mind as I could.

What we had was here and now, in each other's arms, and it was all we could ask for, more than I could have dreamed of when I'd moved to Hog Island. Each day we had together was a gift, filled with love, and he was right not to let any of them be tainted by fear.

I closed my eyes and pictured the future that Mac insisted we would have. Our love would shine brightly through our lives, chasing away the shadows that loomed on the horizon. Somehow we would keep the bleakness of our past from turning our perfect world dark ever again.

After all, he still hadn't built me that picket fence.