



A TIME OF MOURNING

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LOSS

Time takes it all, whether you want it to or not. Time takes it all, time bears it away, and in the end there is only darkness. Sometimes we find others in that darkness, and sometimes we lose them there again.

Stephen King – The Green Mile

I didn't hear the explosion across town. Even the urgently ringing phone didn't catch my attention. It was only when the steel shutters came down over my office windows that I knew something was wrong.

At first I thought it might be a drill since Micky made sure we had those from time to time so that the chantry was prepared for trouble. Or perhaps it was an accident, someone hitting the switch that dropped the shutters without realizing what it did. It could have been either of those things, but deep down I knew that it was not.

Opening the top right hand drawer of my desk, I picked up the Desert Eagle lying there. The gun was loaded with Dragon's Breath rounds, and more than a match for anyone who might have gotten into the chantry uninvited. While I preferred a sword over a gun, at least I knew how to use it.

I was nearly to the door of my office when it burst open. My finger was on the trigger of the gun in my hand, but I stopped myself from firing when I saw Jax Knight standing there. From the anger and fear I saw on his face, I knew that the shutters closing had been no drill, no accident.

"My apologies, my Prince," he said respectfully. "James has authorized a lock down of the chantry. Would you please come with me?"

For the space of a mortal's heartbeat I wondered why James would have been the one to authorize a chantry lock down. Normally that order could have only come from the head of chantry security, from Micky. Then somehow I knew. "What happened?"

Jax hesitated a moment as if he did not want to be the bearer of bad news, but in the end he nodded. "Something happened at Jesters, I'm not sure what yet. James doesn't want to take any chances."

He stood there in the doorway waiting patiently for me to get moving again. Someone else might have asked me again to go with him, or at the least shown signs of impatience that I hadn't followed him already. Jax had been a part of the Salem chantry for nearly a century, he knew better than to overstep his boundaries by ordering me around. He'd come close to that by barging into my office, but that was forgivable, given the circumstances. When I approached the door he moved out of the way and fell into step beside me.

Normally the library was a soothing room, with its tall stacks of books and rows of tables and computers. Tonight as we walked through it I knew that nothing would soothe me but the sight of my childe walking through the door. "What exactly did James say?"

"Not very much," Jax replied. "Only that something had happened, and that Micky might be down."

I stopped and turned to look at him. "You don't believe that, do you, Jax?"

He hesitated a moment, then shook his head sadly. "No, ma'am."

I turned and headed down the long hallway toward the foyer where I could see Ford waiting for me. The night was going to be a long one.

It wasn't that we didn't believe James, or that we didn't believe Micky was gone, no, that wasn't it at all.

We knew he was.

The Jesters formed in the mid 1960s as a fictional band for a TV show of the same name. The show was a huge hit. Each week the group would sing a song or two written by top industry names while instrumentation was provided by talented musicians. In time, the boys wrote and performed their own music for the show, and the albums and movie that followed. The Jesters eventually became one of the most popular pop groups of the 60s, outselling even the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

While I can't say that I had followed the original television series, I did listen to and enjoy their music. When there came an opportunity for me to see them perform at a private party, I knew I couldn't stay away.

Nez Smith was the obvious leader of the group, talented and headstrong, with a gift for business. Jonas Davis was the pretty face who had all the women following after him. Tor Kelson was a flower child, gifted and easily distracted by drugs and sex.

Micky was much like all of them, but even at that first meeting he seemed very different to me. He was gifted, pretty and spoiled by stardom, but underneath it all I could see the man he would become.

That first night Micky and I became lovers. Over the weeks that followed, we became friends. As the weeks flowed into months I decided I could not let his potential die in the brief span that would have been his mortal life. I tied him to me with bonds of my blood, and waited for his fame to end. It didn't take long. After all, four talented headstrong young men with egos the size of Texas could never stay together long.

When the Jesters went their separate ways in the early 1970s, Micky came to Salem for good. I began his training in earnest, teaching him the ways of thaumaturgy, and the clan. Within a few months I knew my instincts had been right. When I finally managed to gain Beth's permission, I turned him into one of us.

He might have lived longer had I left him to his mortal life.

PAIN

Hurts to the bone. You try to bury the pain, but you can't get the hole deep enough, can you? No matter how much you dig, it's still there, broken shards stabbing every time you breathe, cutting you up inside. You know there's only one way to stop the pain. Hurt someone else.

Angel: Release

Some time later in the evening, I found myself in the chantry's parlor, staring into the fireplace. Normally the room was my comfort, my haven, but not tonight. Tonight I was wondering if Micky had felt the explosion that had rocked his car, if he had screamed in pain when the fire had consumed him.

Ford and Alden were behind me, leaning over a table covered in files and maps. They'd been discussing the situation for hours trying to figure out who would have dared to destroy my favorite childe, the only childe I had left. By this time there was no doubt that Micky had been an assassin's target.

A third voice joined the two behind me and I felt something inside of me relax just a little. James Price was in charge of city security, and had been one of the first at the crime scene at Jesters. If Micky had been taken out in an effort to hurt me, the killers would have targeted James as well. A part of me had worried that something would happen to him, but here he was, safe as houses.

I listened absently as Ford and Alden went over the list of possible suspects. The list was a long one, but not long enough for my tastes. They had left one person off, the one woman I felt Micky would have been most likely to blame for his own destruction.

"Could you leave us, gentlemen?" I asked without turning around. "I'd like to speak with James."

After a brief hesitation, the men excused themselves and left me alone with James, my friend, my lover. The last lover I'd trusted had worked with my enemies against me. I'd been blind to Zane's betrayal, unable to see past the fact he was my childe, unwilling to trust the advise of those around me. And yet I trusted James now, perhaps too much so, especially given that the woman I feared had killed my son was one the woman James had once looked upon as a mother.

"If Micky was here," I said softly, "he would remind me once again that the biggest threat to this city is not the Ventrue or the Toreador or the Boston Brujah. He would say that we deserve to be taken out because we have done little to eradicate this threat. I never agreed with Micky about his absolute certainty that she would return to Salem, to the hunt, but now I find myself wondering if he had not been right after all."

"My Prince," James began. As always, his voice and words were formal, respectful of my position as ruler of Salem's vampires. "Eddie and I have already explored that possibility. If she had wanted this thing done, we feel strongly that she would have come at us face to face. Subtlety is not her forte." He paused for a moment before continuing. "Besides, my Prince, Micky's accusations have always been made in private. How could she have known the way he felt to have targeted him first and so specifically?"

How could she indeed. Any normal mortal would have had no way of knowing what was happening in the city that she had walked away from when her lover had met final death. Of course, any normal mortal would be no threat to my city, to my childe. Eliza Gentry was far from normal. Aside from her own preternatural abilities, she was surrounded by Magi, including her own daughter. I was certain that she would have found a way to get whatever information she needed, if she wanted it badly enough, but there was no reason for me to tell James that.

"It was surely no secret within the clan how he felt," I replied softly. "I doubt that there is a traitor in our ranks, however it has happened before." I turned to look at him, wanting to see his

eyes. "It is also possible that she learned subtlety from your sire. She certainly learned the art of cooperation from him."

"If I may speak plainly, my Prince," he began carefully, "Eliza paid a greater price for Corrine's safety, and for a much longer time, than she paid for a short life with Cormac, Kindred as he was. I do not believe it was any small secret that her cooperation, feigned as it was—and it was, my Prince—extended only as far as Kindred and their politics were involved."

He wasn't telling me anything that I hadn't already guessed, hadn't discussed in depth with Ford. The girl had hated vampires when she had first come to Salem, and it had only been through her lover's arrival in town that she had been anything close to manageable.

"Alone, you might never have known she was a bound servant," he continued. "Cormac not only allowed but encouraged her to speak her mind with him and, to a certain extent, with me. Eliza has disappeared permanently, and Corrine is no longer living here, though she has visited the area on a few occasions. She will not surface again, even for something as sweet as revenge. The only way that particular snake may come out of its nest is if she is baited." He sighed as if realizing that he'd been talking some time. "Eliza is gone, and will not return. Of that I am certain."

I couldn't help but smile, if only a little. "You sound like Ford. He is also certain she will not return." I sighed, wishing that things had turned out differently. Ford insisted that Eliza be allowed an opportunity for a normal life, that she deserved it after all the blood she had spilled for the clan.

"We've lost so many these last few years," I murmured, turning back to the fireplace and seeing in the flames the faces of all those we had lost, most of them to death, but some for other reasons as well. My childe Akari whom I'd killed with my own hands. Zane had betrayed me and found final death at the hands of my servant. Prudence—no, Kate, had also betrayed us, and Eliza had taken her head. Christina had lost her memory and her mind, and was now living as a Gangrel in Detroit. Cormac had died at the hands of a demon while trying to save the world. While I regretted the opportunity to study a dhampyr, Eliza would never have survived in the clan without her true love. And now Micky was gone, my son, the only childe I'd ever made that had not betrayed me. "I never thought that I would lose him too."

"There can be others," he reminded me gently. "I know it's cold to say, but those lost can be replaced."

I turned to look at him in surprise. "Are you suggesting that I find another to embrace?"

"When you are finished grieving for Micky of course," he said quickly. "That option is open to you, should you wish it."

I thought about his words as I walked to my favorite chair and sat down. In my time as a vampire I had embraced only three, all men, all of whom I had called lover after the embrace. Perhaps I had gone about things the wrong way. Perhaps Akari and Zane would not have betrayed me had I not brought them to my bed. Although he had also been my lover, Micky had never betrayed me. Had he survived for a thousand years, I knew for certain that he would never have done so.

James interrupted my thoughts. "Whoever it was that did this, it appears that Micky was their only target."

"I don't understand why someone would target him. It would be different if he were still the sheriff, but..." I shook my head, hurt, angry and confused, then looked up at him. "No one else in the city has been hit? No one?"

He walked closer to my chair. "No my Prince, not yet at least."

Not yet. The words brought hope and bitterness to my heart. Hope that no one else in my family would die tonight, and bitterness that someone in my city had laid this grief at my door. Tears blurred my vision and suddenly anger swept through me like a flood.

I might have ordered terrible things done in the heat of my grief, had James not been with me. I might have ordered the death of the Toreador, of the Ventrue, of anyone who had ever slighted me or my childe. To my everlasting gratitude, James was there, and with simple logic he helped me see that blind vengeance would not bring Micky back, nor would it take out the bastard who had killed my son.

No, blind vengeance would not do.

GRIEF

And the reason that she loved him
Was the reason I loved him too
David Crosby – Hero

THIS CHAPTER IS NOT COMPLETE AND IS ONLY INCLUDED TO PROVIDE CONTINUITY.

James continued to investigate into the murder of my childe, but there was little news. A body had been found in a park in town and the woman was eventually identified as an Irish Terrorist. The trail ended in Belfast at the bodies of her rebel brethren.

Over the next few night, cards and letters of condolence came to the chantry from many of the other Kindred in Salem, and from other cities as well. I took note of those who had sent a kind word as well as those who did not.

I was not the only one in the clan who mourned for my murdered childe, nor was my grief the greatest. Sarah Hamilton had spent the last 4 years with Micky, had loved him more than I'd ever loved another soul. Sarah had owned the import company with Micky, and now it was hers alone.

Micky had prepared a will of sorts that left his club, the Jesters, to me. I couldn't bear the thought of it. I'd gone back once since his death, stood in the parking lot and looked at the charred spot on the asphalt, and wept. Knowing that I couldn't bear to handle it myself, I turned the management of the Jesters over to Lydia, Micky's only childe. James suggested she keep it closed for a few weeks, and I agreed.

Micky had taken on two ghouls, one who ran Jesters, and Jonah Evans who was a police officer. Since Lydia was taking over the club, I offered Ethan to her. James expressed interest in Jonah, and I really saw no reason to tell him no. He was my Sheriff, after all. The fact that he was my lover had nothing to do with it.

INTERROGATION

Maximus: Do you find it hard to do your duty?

Cicero: Sometimes I do what I want to do. The rest of the time I do what I have to.

Gladiator

A few weeks after the explosion, James came to me with the news that Jean Davison and Beverly Thomas had been overheard at Guilty Pleasures talking about other possible Tremere targets. James was already having them followed, but now he wanted to bring them in for questioning.

"What exactly do you have in mind?" I asked.

"Bring them in," he replied, "and depending on how cooperative they are, interrogate them."

We needed answers, justice, and even though I knew it would cause problems with the Ventrue and Toreador, I agreed. "I'd rather not have them in the Chantry, but since Jester's is still closed, you can question them there. Perhaps the proximity to the crime scene would unnerve them enough to loosen their tongues."

"We will undertake it at once," he assured me eagerly. "Would you care to witness the questioning?"

My presence would only inflame the Primogens of their clans further, but I had to be there. I had to know for my own sake whether they spoke the truth. "I would."

It took a few more days of surveillance for James to pin down the time and place he and his men would pick them up. He learned that the women met at least once a week, usually at one of the Kindred owned establishments in town.

James and his men waited outside of Guilty Pleasures for the women to leave, and after they separated to go to their own vehicles, the men stepped in. They drugged the women, and easily overcame their weak resistance. Less than twenty minutes later the women were chained in the two basement cells at the Jester's, ready for interrogation.

James spoke with Jean first, and she was most cooperative. She answered every question respectfully and, given the colors of her aura, honestly. Had she been Tremere, I might have liked the girl. As it was I could easily dismiss her as unimportant to the investigation.

Beverly, however, was not so cooperative. She stated loudly and arrogantly that she had done nothing wrong then demanded to be released. She even went so far as to complain about how badly her clan had been treated since I had taken over the city. When James asked if she had been involved in Micky's death, her only response was a heartfelt wish that the bomb had taken out a few more of "you freaky sorcerers."

Her sass earned her the butt of James' shotgun across the face. Almost immediately I could feel her using her clan's abilities to instill awe within us. Luckily, James and I had anticipated such a tactic.

"Beverly," I said sharply, surprising her into looking directly into my eyes. A few specific commands later, the good vibes coming from the girl stopped. "James," I said softly, "please continue."

And so he did continue, moving to stand over her threateningly. "What is it going to take to persuade you to tell us what you know?" he asked in a reasonable tone.

"Is ignorance really bliss, or are you just faking it?" she demanded, her voice as harsh as acid on rice paper. "Anyone with half a brain could have figured out what I know!" She gasped in mock surprise. "Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot for a moment I was speaking to a fawning hastily-embraced pimple."

"Now that wasn't very nice, was it?" He calmly pointed the shotgun downward toward her knee and rested barrel against the fabric of her Versace skirt. The retort of the weapon was nearly loud enough to deafen us all in the small room.

The girl cursed and screamed, demanding that she be released, that I punish James for his audacity. No one spoke until she had calmed herself, then James stepped to her side once more.

"Now that I have your attention, let's try it again," he told her, his voice still calm and reasonable. "What do you know about Micky's death?"

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" she yelled back. "How the hell am I supposed to know who the fuck offed that son of a whore? For all I know your bastard sire crawled out of the grave and set the bomb himself, you ignorant pussy-whipped weasel!"

"My Prince?" James asked.

I could tell by the look on his face he didn't believe her, but unfortunately I did. "As much as I'd like to believe that she lies," I said reluctantly, "I think she's telling the truth."

Beverly's honesty had just saved her life, but she didn't seem to know when to keep her mouth shut. "It's amazing that our vain dull witted leader has more sense than her craven slave-loving maggot of a sheriff. Now that we've gotten that cleared up, *let me go!*"

Before I could even open my mouth, James had turned and laid the shotgun barrel against her forehead. When he spoke he sounded so much like his sire that it sent shivers down my spine. "I suggest you find some respect, bitch. Do you really think there is anyone here who wouldn't back my story if I said that you admitted to Micky's death and I carried out justice right here, right now, and took your arrogant, worthless head off?"

The girl hid the fear her eyes betrayed by closing them. She had difficulty speaking at first, with the barrel of the gun pressed against her head, but finally she managed to mumble a few words. "I am sorry if I offended the prince."

James was not satisfied, and honestly neither was I. "She is *your* prince."

Beverly hesitated a moment more, then said, "I apologize if I have offended my prince."

When James looked at me, I wanted more than anything to tell him to pull the trigger. Beverly was trouble, no doubt about it, and if I let her walk out of Jesters alive, I would regret it. Unfortunately, I had a city to run, and the Toreador would not take kindly to me killing off yet another of their number. "I suppose it would just cause more problems with the Toreador if we beheaded her," I said with a sigh.

While I did have to let her go, there was no one to tell me that I couldn't make certain alterations to her thought patterns. By the time James had unchained her, I was sure that she would be respectful and loyal to me, at least for a few weeks, until the mind manipulations I had done worn off.

While she sat in the chair trying to figure out how to get up with a shattered knee, I stood and walked toward the door, letting James know with a look that I wanted him to follow. I led him to an empty room where we could talk without being overheard. "You don't believe she was telling the truth?"

"I don't believe I have enough to prove that she wasn't," he said reasonably. Then his voice took on an eager tone. "If my prince orders her death, I will obey."

When Beverly was in her right mind once again, she would hate and resent the Tremere more than she ever had in the past. On the other hand, ordering her death without provocation would cause more trouble than the girl was worth. "I don't need her kind of trouble in my city, but I don't

want more trouble with Arlen either," I said thoughtfully. "However, if it looked as if someone else took her out..."

"I will see what I can come up with," he replied with a smile that I couldn't help but return.

I laid my hand on the side of his face, enjoying the feel of his skin against the palm of my hand. It was the first thing I'd really enjoyed since Micky had been taken away from me. "I knew I could count on you."

"Yes, my prince."

Suddenly I was impatient to get Beverly and Jean returned to their cars, impatient to be alone in the chantry with my lover, but I knew it would have to wait.

All good things come in time, and that is true with both pleasure and revenge. Revenge was still out of my reach, but pleasure was only a few hours away.