

Rebecca stared down at the patterned carpet, wondering why it looked so familiar as a new pain shot through her left shoulder.

Dislocated shoulder, paisley carpet, she thought muzzily, healing her injury without wondering how she came by it. Her perceptions were fogged, as if she was waking from a long sleep – *but I'm not in the chantry*, she realized, *where am I?*

“Come on Rebecca, we have to get going.” A familiar voice penetrated the haze; Alexander Merette, her clan’s leader.

Lifting her eyes from the familiar-yet-unfamiliar floor cost her more effort than she expected as a throbbing bruise on the back of her neck surprised her. Hissing in discomfort, Rebecca finally met the gaze of the elder who was waiting for her to rise from the sofa she hadn’t realized was supporting her. Merette seemed perfectly calm, not even fiddling with his glasses as was his usual habit, and that upset Rebecca more than anything else so far, even though she couldn’t understand why.

“Where...?” speaking was difficult – not because of pain, instead fear froze her tongue. *What am I afraid of? I don't know!* But the fear existed, nonetheless.

“You’re at the Toreador cottage.” Merette’s told her briskly. “You suffered an attack near here, on your way back to the chantry. It’s a good thing the Prince’s men found you. You could have been killed.”

Doubt overwhelmed Rebecca. Even as she heard Merette’s words, she knew they weren’t true. The realization increased her nameless dread, rather than alleviating it.

Despite the urge to avoid Merette’s gaze, Rebecca forced herself to regard his too-calm countenance. He was watching her steadily, not showing any of the concern that Rebecca would have expected from him for one of his own. *He’s lying*, she realized, *and he doesn’t even care if I know it*. Rebecca tried to stifle a growing feeling of betrayal. *Why would he lie to me?*

Looking back down at herself, trying to assess the myriad aches and bruises that assailed her senses, Rebecca realized that her clothes were different from the ones she remembered wearing earlier that evening. The linen slacks and oversized shirt that she currently wore were never a part of her wardrobe.

“My clothes?” a tired mumble as Rebecca slowly identified the worst of her pain. *Cracked ribs, a fractured wrist. What hit me? And why is Merette lying about it?* The more she thought, the less she liked.

“Damaged in the fight.” Merette shrugged.

Tearing fabric... The sound of it came quite clearly to her, accompanied by the sensation of clutching hands pulling at her skin. Rebecca bit her tongue against a squeak of fright.

“Do you not remember?” Merette asked carefully and Rebecca sensed that her life depended upon the answer.

“It’s a blur.” Rebecca replied slowly, which was true enough. “There are flickers...”

“Do you know who attacked you?” Another loaded question and now Merette was moving closer to her. Rebecca’s fear threatened to grow into panic.

Rebecca shook her head slowly, careful of the pain it caused. She searched her memory for other stray moments, remembering the sensation of being held down, of pain and humiliation. “I can’t remember!” she insisted, choking back a sob.

“You poor woman.” Rebecca wanted to believe that Merette’s sympathy was genuine but his assessing gaze was entirely too familiar – too recent in her memory.

A door to her left opened and Rebecca suppressed a gasp as Timothy Swank entered the room. Her incipient panic threatened to consume her, but she forced it back. The sight of the Toreador seneschal threw her into turmoil for reasons she didn’t understand.

“How’re things?” his manner was only slightly more serious than his usually affable demeanor. Rebecca wondered if it was her imagination that made his smile into something sinister. She shifted away from the two elders, uneasy under their scrutiny and increasingly alarmed by a new discomfort within her body. Rebecca folded over her knees to hide her face as she realized the source of the pain inside her. *Rape? I've been raped?* As soon as the question came to her, she knew the answer. She had never been the victim of sexual abuse, but the source of this pain, the type of injuries done to her, could not be mistaken. This time, a moan of anguish could not be stifled.

“I think she’s in shock.” Rebecca heard Merette’s voice pronounce confidently.

“Ah, of course.” Was that reassurance or relief in Swank’s voice? Rebecca couldn’t tell. “After such an incident, I can understand it...”. Rebecca felt Swank place a hand upon her shoulder and she couldn’t help flinching away from his touch and an unbidden memory of his face close to hers – too close for their slight acquaintance, and his expression too vicious for a casual encounter.

“You had better take her back to your chantry, Alex.” Swank suggested, his hand grasping Rebecca’s shoulder a little too firmly for comfort, causing another involuntary gasp. “Let her get some rest.”

“Of course.” Merette agreed mildly. “Come on, Rebecca.” Like it or not, Rebecca was pulled to her feet – albeit with a show of gentleness – and guided towards a door on her right. Glancing behind her, Rebecca saw that Swank’s expression fade from smug confidence to hard-faced calculation. She desperately hoped that he didn’t notice her noticing him.

Merette guided Rebecca through the darkened main gallery of the vacant cottage, past a half dozen works of art carefully displayed for visitors. Not wanting to look at Merette again just yet, Rebecca glanced at a grouping of sculptures, all carved from foam and soft wood, all of them anthropomorphic, rounded shapes.

“Rico.” The word was blurted out before Rebecca could stop it, accompanying another shard of memory.

Merette glanced at her sharply. “What was that?”

Rebecca pointed dumbly at one of the foam and wood creations. “That one reminded me of Rico.” She said, deliberately dulling her tone and staring into the middle distance. Merette’s suspicions faded immediately.

“I suppose it might.” He agreed softly, talking as if to a child. Rebecca nodded dumbly, lost to a memory of being violated by the Toreador neonate while his elder laughed encouragement in the background.

Pretend you’re in shock. Pretend you’re a fool, Rebecca told herself, over and over. She pointed to another sculpture that was a collection of ovals roughly resembling a bipedal body. “And that one’s Swank,” another gesture. “And that one’s you.” Rebecca forced a weak giggle that threatened to escalate to hysteria as she remembered Merette’s blood splashing onto her face as it was poured down her throat. Seeing a small, twisted piece of clay on a pedestal, Rebecca pointed at it. “And that one’s me,” she sighed. “The Toreador are so talented.”

“That’s their blessing.” Merette told her, an edge of irritation creeping into his voice. “Now come on, you’ve taken enough of their hospitality.” Rebecca flinched at that, but managed to turn it into a jerky nod of agreement.

“Where did they find me?” a whispered question.

Merette glanced at her, considering her answer. “On the border between Hayward and Castro Valley. You must have been on your way back from that meeting on campus.” Rebecca nodded dumbly, she had met with an archeology student she was mentoring earlier that evening.

“My car?” she persisted.

Merette dismissed the question with a shrug. “You weren’t with it. I’m sure we’ll find it sooner or later. You really were very lucky.” He repeated.

Lucky? Rebecca wanted to shriek. *Lucky to be an elder’s toy? How many of them...?* Rebecca veered from that question even as she wanted to know the answer. Instead, she reluctantly followed Merette out of the mansion that the Toreador liked to call a cottage towards his BMW. It took every ounce of her will not to boil Merette’s blood in anger. Not that she was sure she could manage it, given the aching that persisted throughout her body. But her rage at this violation and betrayal cried out for vengeance, even although she realized that such actions would guarantee her death.

Every twinge brought a new memory and Rebecca was too frightened of the risk of Frenzy to heal herself any further – although she fuzzily recalled being forced to feed from several kindred. *Merette, Swank and...who else?* The resurfacing memories followed a logic of their own.

A knot of pain in Rebecca’s back recalled a shattering blow from Swank’s hand. The spike of pain in her neck summoned the memory of Murdoch’s knee on her throat as busy hands tore her clothes. A chill colder than the brisk winter air of the parking lot went through her. *Murdoch has barely been here a month! Why would he want to hurt me?* But, she supposed if an elder craved amusement, the object really didn’t matter. *Maybe I should be flattered.* Fear and delirium danced through her mind. Rebecca felt her knees buckling and couldn’t stop herself from collapsing against the side of Merette’s car. The shiny black paintwork felt more welcoming than Syn’s caresses...

Rebecca wanted to retreat into torpor, or even the false memories that the elders had offered her but could do neither as gravity pulled her down to the cold asphalt. She heard Merette mutter a curse and felt him pick her up as easily as she would take her book-bag in hand, propping her against the car as he opened the passenger door. Collapsing onto the leather upholstery summoned the *déjà vu* of being tossed

onto the sofa that she had recently awoken upon, but bleeding, bruised and hysterical before her assailants had forced calmness upon her.

*I couldn't even defend myself, she thought bitterly. What kind of vampire – what kind of **person** am I if I couldn't even hurt them back?* Rebecca began trembling and she didn't bother to fight it, nor the disgust that welled up inside her. *How could I let this happen to me?*

Merette glanced at Rebecca and frowned. “Why don't you get some rest, Rebecca? Get some sleep.” He suggested.

Rebecca's will - already frayed by the need to keep the truth to herself - was unable to resist the command implicit in Merette's words. She sank into oblivion, wondering if she would remember anything when she awoke again – and whether that would be a blessing or a curse.