

Patricia's return to the townhouse she shared with her childer was as careful and as quiet as she could manage it. Primarily, her stealth was borne of a half-formed idea of eavesdropping on whatever conversation Beverly and Elliot might be having in the aftermath of earlier events. Reluctantly, Patricia had to admit that the twins were far smarter than she, and she saw nothing wrong with using every advantage available to her.. Learning Elliot's true opinion of their earlier spat might prove useful. *So much for a mindless evening at the charity ball*, Patricia thought irritably.

But the secondary reason for Patricia's careful movement was the most telling: she was drunk. Not staggering, certainly, but she was a little *too* relaxed. In the aftermath of her stormy conversation with Elliot – and his unwarranted implication that Patricia had meddled in his life pre-mortem – Patricia had felt the need for a little reinforcement. Rather than seethe and stew over the exchange with her childe, Patricia had spent the past hour with a half-drunk whore of her acquaintance. Whores made for good vessels, Trish believed – but only the expensive ones. The diseases that they might carry were incidental to her and they didn't ask questions when called to a back alley after midnight. Overall, Trish considered them quite a bargain.

By now, Patricia felt quite tipsy and detached from her surroundings. Intoxication was a pleasant change from her occasional binges on painkillers – and more manageable, too. If she had been high on Percaset rather than booze, she wouldn't have been able to find the door with both hands, let alone unlock it quietly.

Fortunately, the building facilitated quiet entrances. The foyer was moderately grandiose with a high ceiling and elegant fixtures, and – like the Victorian dwellings from which the architect had taken his inspiration – almost entirely removed it from the rest of the house. The quiet click of the lock carried no more than a few feet. Leaning against the heavy oak doorway, Patricia took a moment to sober up slightly, as silently unlocking the door had almost defeated her. Her head clearing, she cocked an ear for some clue as to where to go next.

Listening carefully, Patricia heard a slight scrape of movement from the study to her left. The door was slightly ajar, and a subdued light seeped into the hallway. It was too dim to perceive details, but Patricia believed that she would find her childer in the darkened room. Alcohol imparted arrogance, and Patricia was confident she could peer into the room without disturbing the occupants. She stepped up to the door that led into the office that Beverly and Elliot shared and looked inside.

Beverly sat at his desk, his back to the doorway. As usual, papers covered his work-area and his expensive chair had half-a-dozen sticky notes clinging here and there along the arms. But Bev's mind was not on his work. His teeth were buried in Elliot's left wrist, his dedicated taking of Elliot's vitae apparently undistracted by his own bloodied wrist in Elliot's mouth. Eyes closed, they were clearly consumed by this activity.

The room was quite silent – Trish strained to hear *something*, but nothing came to her. She wanted to hear the ticking of a clock, traffic passing outside, *something* to break the solemn silence and enable her to disengage from this scene. But the intrusions of the mundane world had vanished for the time being and she remained, unable to look away.

Patricia noticed several spots of blood on the hardwood floor by Elliot's feet and she wondered how long the pair had been locked together like this. Submitting to a morbid curiosity, Patricia reached out to feel the minds of her childer – a telepathic feather's touch. Sensation almost overwhelmed her. The heady vitae, the feral pleasure of feeding and the emotional bond that merged the closely tied pair almost into one being, was a dizzying swirl of thoughtless *feeling* and emotion - an inundating whirlpool that threatened to render Patricia senseless.

Humans could keep their crass intimacies; *this* was the closest moment that could exist between two kindred – as Patricia knew from her own experience. But her fleeting remembrance of strange times during past years faded. The here and now compelled her attention. Silently, she regretted her decision not to keep herself hidden for she had stumbled across a scene she wanted to savor – rather than disturb.

At that moment – it followed so quickly that Patricia had to wonder if she had somehow broadcast her thoughts to her childe – Elliot's eyes opened. Patricia kept quite still, wondering what to do. Elliot looked directly at Trish, his eyes conveying an expression of amusement mixed with something Patricia couldn't identify – a challenge? But he didn't alter his actions one whit. A slight moan from Beverly caused his gaze to flicker momentarily, but nothing more. He calmly continued drinking from Beverly's veins, well aware of his Sire's presence.

Patricia was frozen in place. Elliot's flagrant exhibitionism – for that was what it was – shocked her. It was hardly something she could condemn, given her own voyeurism and yet... She couldn't tell if Elliot was belittling her or complimenting her by suggesting her presence wasn't a disturbance. Given Elliot's earlier implication that he considered Patricia to be without gender – and therefore, it could be assumed, not worth detesting for being female – she had to assume it was the latter, rather than the former.

Another drop of Beverly's blood fell to the floor and Trish had to fight back the slightly hysterical idea of chiding her brood for messy habits. But the thought was only an attempt to hide a deeper disturbance. Despite her recent alleyway encounter, the sight – and smell – of kindred blood excited her. The Beast was contained by her recent satiation, but Patricia's everyday restraint wasn't a significant thing. Her crumbling restraint was further eroded by intoxication – and the unspoken challenge in Elliot's gaze.

Patricia glanced away momentarily, looking for the strength to resist temptation. She *wanted* to barge in, insist that she be noticed as an equal – or at least more than a voyeur. *But why do something that at least one of them is expecting?* Shaking her head fractionally, Patricia forced herself away from the open door. Turning away, she realized that going with her gut instinct might have provided moments of egotistical catharsis in the past, but it also tended to create irrevocable consequences. Patricia's desire to avoid anything irrevocable overcame her momentary desire for a childish temper tantrum – for now, at least.

"Jealous." The muttered comment was quite clear in the still air, muttered by Elliot. Patricia froze for a moment, strongly tempted to turn on her child and confront him, but she resisted. *This is not the time and I don't feel like dealing with consequences just now*, she decided firmly. Quickly picking up her pace again, she strode out of the study and towards her room.

Patricia's "room" within her shared haven was actually a small suite of bedroom, bathroom and living area. It allowed her her own, definable space and something more than just four walls to call *home*. Her childer's means had paid for most of what they shared, but these rooms were indisputably her own.

Instead of the severe Italian furniture preferred by the Mantles, Patricia chose a friendlier – but no less contemporary – look. Several well-upholstered chairs in bright red dominated the living room, and the bathroom was a mixture of navy blue and white, with the latest fixtures resting upon gleaming tiled counters. Elliot sneeringly referred to Patricia's taste as "High Ikea", which made her wonder what he would say about the clinical austerity of the light-tight room in which she slept every day – bare walls and hospital corners. At this moment, what Elliot and his brother thought of her weighed very much on her mind.

Patricia was tempted to ingest a pill to ease her jangled nerves, but she a bath instead. Taking a bath was a soothing routine and something she often did to try to get her mind off of whatever might be vexing her at the moment – without resorting to drugs. Tonight was no different. The oft-repeated ritual of carefully hanging up clothes, drawing the bath, finding some music to put on the CD player she kept by the sink all helped her put a little distance between the past few hours and now. *I should take baths more often*, Patricia realized as she climbed into the tub. *And leave the boozing to the humans*. Reluctantly, she burned the last of the alcohol out of her system, realizing that it was only going to make her that much hungrier. Well, it was nothing that couldn't wait until tomorrow to be taken care of.

A few minutes later, somewhat soothed by warm steam and the sound of Beethoven, Patricia sighed contentedly and leaned back in the tub. She had gotten the lingering odor of dirt and blood off her skin and that alone had gone a long way to sweeten her mood. Now she was content to just relax in the tub, eyes closed, listen to the *Pastoral* and let her thoughts wander.

"Why did he react that way?" Patricia wondered, thinking of Elliot. Patricia had a chronic habit of thinking out loud. It was her favorite way to identify and resolve problems. After all, it wasn't like she had to worry about the implications such habits made about her sanity.

"Am I going too far to think that he would deliberately grind my nose in his...relationship?" Patricia sighed. "I think so. I know his intelligence. He knows I've watched them for months before now – why should tonight make any difference? So, Why? Why the exhibitionism, that is? The pleasures of blood are obvious enough," Trish muttered wryly, sliding a little further into the warm water.

"Turn that around. Why my voyeurism? Just an extension of my life as an outsider? Always outside, looking in." Patricia shrugged slightly, enjoying the sensation of water rippling across her shoulders. *Could it be that simple? What were my choices?*

Irresistibly, the temptation that had teased her earlier danced through her mind once again. Patricia chuckled again. "A bloody daisy chain? And risk being thrall to both and regnant to neither? No thanks. Still," she sighed. "The thrill of the forbidden can be a hell of a lure." *But is it worth the risk of casting myself as the undead Claire Niveau? God, no. Talk about awkward repercussions.*

The incident gnawed at her. "Why let me watch?" she paused for a moment's thought. "Why not? It was a private moment, certainly, but don't I know those two almost as well as they know themselves? Was it a show of confidence? Or simply adolescent boasting?" She shook her head. "I doubt that."

Another possibility occurred to her. *Am I part of the scenery? Am I that unimportant – non-existent gender not withstanding, of course? That possibility rankled worst of all.*

"Hell, am I going to even talk to them about this," she wondered. "Or is this entirely pointless?"

"I sometimes wonder about that myself," Elliot's voice was an unexpected – and unwelcome – interruption. Patricia opened her eyes and turned to see him casually leaning in the doorway, utterly nonchalant.

Patricia did her best not to glare at him. "Thanks ever so," she grumbled. "I don't suppose it occurred to you to wait in the living room?" She didn't want to be perturbed by his presence, but it was difficult.

Elliot nodded easily. "Oh, I was," he admitted. "But when people start talking to themselves," he shrugged. "I get curious."

"And the idea of waiting until I was done didn't cross your mind, either?"

Elliot's answer was a direct gaze. "Like childe, like sire, hm?"

Patricia winced, conceding the point. She settled back down in the tub and then realized that she was hardly going to be able to relax with Elliot standing a few feet away. She sighed again. "Hell," she muttered, rising from the water. "Since you're here, pass me that robe." Patricia watched Elliot carefully as he reached for the thick robe that she had draped over a warming rack, looking for signs of discomfort. If he was uncomfortable, it was well hidden by an expression of slightly amused detachment while he watched her don the robe, wrap a towel around her damp hair. *I guess he was telling the truth when he said he didn't consider me a woman,* she realized. The realization that her childer probably didn't hate her for an accident of birth was scant consolation.

Finally, Patricia led the way out of the bathroom and back into her living room, noticing Beverly quietly sitting on a sofa, watching his Sire and brother. *At least one of them still has some sense of discretion – but who am I to condemn?* Trisha thought wryly. She sat down on a comfortable chair and resting her feet on a matching ottoman, while Elliot resumed what was apparently his earlier seat next to his brother.

"So, what's so important you had to come get me out of the bath?" Patricia asked abruptly.

"Nothing in particular. Call it an impulse," Elliot smiled with a glint in his eye.

Patricia closed her eyes for a long moment and tried to count to ten in Latin. She made it as far as four before speaking again. "There are times when you really remind me of my Sire," Patricia declared wearily. "Those are also the moments when I really want to knock your teeth out of your head." She added.

"A skill we're only just realizing you're well-qualified to do," Elliot replied quickly.

Patricia bit back her first response. "Elliot, if you're just come to play some damn fool games with me," she said carefully. "I'm not in the mood. Not half an hour ago, and not now."

"Is that so, Patricia?" Elliot replied easily. "You're suddenly above vicious thrills?"

Heeding to her earlier instincts, Patricia swallowed the angry reply that would have ordinarily been her response to deliberate needling. "Go on."

Elliot glanced at his brother, apparently surprised – *didn't expect me to keep my temper?* Patricia thought, a tad peeved. *I can't precisely blame them for that. Still, I'm curious too. Where's this going? How much did they overhear?*

"You've said that you've always been on the outside, looking in," Elliot continued, his manner giving no clue if his choice of words were derived from Trish's earlier monologue. "Why should it be different now?"

"Because I wanted to be a *part* of something, damn it!"

"Was that why you Embraced us?" Beverly asked abruptly.

"No!" Patricia responded immediately. *Maybe.* She retreated. "Why I Embraced you has nothing to do with this." She concluded, her voice stiff.

"I don't believe that." Elliot responded vehemently. "You want to be a part of us? That's impossible. Nothing can come between Bev and I."

“Not unless you’ve had her first, hm?” Patricia enjoyed a small moment’s satisfaction at Elliot’s irritated frown. He wasn’t the only one who could play these games.

The silence between the trio lengthened into awkwardness and danced on the edge of sullen. Elliot decided it was time to change tack.

“Why were you high last night?” he demanded.

Patricia fidgeted in her seat a little, unhappy with the new topic. “It’s part of who I am – what I do,” she muttered.

“How can getting high be a part of the process of causing pain?” Bev’s clinical tone surprised Elliot. It was hard to imagine that either of them could be totally calm about this subject.

“When I was...younger.” Patricia began, reluctantly. “I still had some sort of conscience. I had a difficult time reconciling that with my...needs. Michael...” Patricia’s usual confidence evaporated as she remembered those first years under her Sire’s tutelage and she veered away from the subject. “The drugs were a relief – a little bit of oblivion after that extreme high.” She smiled, a wry expression. “It used to scare me, in those days. How good I felt twisting the knife – and that just compounded the problem.”

“What frightened you more? The realization that you enjoyed hurting someone – or the intensity of the emotion, itself?” Bev asked, eyes intent.

That brought Patricia up short. It was something that she hadn’t considered. “I...I don’t know. It was all so intense in those days. Almost a blur.”

“What about your Sire?” Elliot spoke this time, his tone deceptively mild. “Why didn’t he help you?”

“Michael?” Patricia laughed without humor. “Why should he? My binges didn’t interfere with my development. Maybe he didn’t know *how* to help me.” *Quite the opposite*, she thought, remembering the succession of addicts Michael had brought to her during her fledgling weeks.

“Or maybe he didn’t want to.” Elliot commented, ignoring Patricia’s sharp glare. “Dependence keeps the children close to home, after all.”

Patricia shook her head. Her lingering, misplaced affection for her Sire wouldn’t allow her to consider such a thing. “No,” she insisted, her voice wavering. “He shouldn’t –“ she paused. “He wouldn’t have done that to me.” Bitter memories returned to her. *Who do you obey, Patricia?* She curled up on her chair, withdrawing into herself. “I was already his. There was no need...”

Elliot watched Patricia’s façade crumble. Clearly she was being forced to realize something that she should have discovered years ago. But just as he believed she had been pushed over the edge to catharsis, Patricia closed up like a fan and shook off her disquiet. Elliot suppressed a weary sigh. The jinn had been forced back into the bottle.

“And you wonder why we won’t let you in,” he murmured as he watched Patricia pull herself together.

“What?” Patricia stared at him blankly.

“You mutter about wanting to be *part* of something, but you can’t open up,” his tone was blunt.

Patricia opened her mouth for an angry rebuttal and then stopped. *He’s right*. She sagged back into her chair, the angry moment dissipating.

“Why not let her in?” Beverly asked, quietly abrupt.

“What?” Elliot’s surprise was plain. He wasn’t used to being surprised by Beverly – not anymore.

“Claire wasn’t enough? She didn’t fuck things up enough?” Elliot’s vehemence surprised Patricia. *Then again*, she thought, *why should I expect them to abandon all emotions when I can’t?*

“This is different,” Bev replied easily. Trisha wondered if Elliot could perceive his brother’s amusement. This wasn’t a topic too close to Beverly’s heart – this was just intellectual distraction.

“She’s a pill-addled neurotic surgeon rather than a pill-addled neurotic actress. That’s all the difference in the world.” Elliot’s contempt rankled and Patricia didn’t bother to hide her irritation.

“She got us off the pills,” A serious note crept in under Bev’s levity. “Why not do the same for her and see what happens?”

*I do not want to be a divisive element*, Patricia thought, whilst feeling more and more like a spectator, rather than a participant. *That’s the exact opposite of what I wanted*. Stubbornly, she ignored the faint hope that arose in the back of her mind. After all, addiction had been her constant companion for thirty years.

“Maybe we should.” Elliot glanced at his Sire. “Maybe then you wouldn’t be quite so neurotic. Maybe then you’ll get over this voyeuristic tendency of yours.”

Patricia tried for a casualness that she didn't feel. "I would hardly call the one incident a trend." The words fell flat.

"Really?" Elliot replied, dry as dust. "And for how long were you watching us before we were Embraced?"

Patricia scowled, unable to reply to that. She didn't want to return to the conversation at the gala.

Elliot made a dismissive gesture. "This is a pointless conversation. It's not as if she would make it."

*That* did it. "Why? Because I'm just another useless female?" Patricia snapped. "Fuck you," she grumbled, her pride stung. "I'm *not* Claire Niveau."

"Then prove it," Elliot retorted, equally irritated.

A moment's surprised silence reigned as the trio realized what they had just walked into. Beverly nodded slightly, echoing his brother's challenge.

Patricia chewed on her lip – a habit from her breathing days that still annoyed her. "Fine," she spat. "Fine."

Abruptly, she stood up and walked into her bathroom, ignoring Beverly's puzzled inquiry. A moment later, she returned with two small pill-bottles in hand. Patricia placed them on the central coffee table with exaggerated care. Turning to her "working bag" she withdrew another plastic vial, and put that with the first two.

She paused for a moment, looking around the room with a distracted frown. "Where did I? Oh, I remember." She stepped on to a nearby desk and retrieved a small lacquered box from inside a recessed light fixture. That one she tossed at Elliot, which he easily caught.

"That's all of them," she pronounced, returning to her seat. "I think," she frowned.

Beverly picked up the bottles. "Interesting combinations," he commented with a wince, looking at the labels.

"It works – worked – for me." She sighed. "Christ, the next few nights are going to be bad," she realized. "I haven't had a serious detox since..." She paused. *Since Michael made sure I stayed hooked after my Embrace.* She veered away from that memory. "Since quite a while ago."

"We could just put a stake in your chest, let you ride it out that way," Beverly suggested brusquely.

Patricia stared at him, torn between surprise and suspicion. "No thanks."

Elliot smiled blandly, as if the suggestion had been only a joke. "Then yes, you're in a for a few nights of hell."

"What goes around comes around." Trish muttered.

"Karma, Patricia?" Trish didn't like the smug undertone of Elliot's voice. "We're in charge of our own lives." He echoed one of Patricia's favorite axioms.

"Alright, don't rub it in." Patricia tried to shake off her irritation. She had just handed over a large measure of control – soon to be followed by her dignity – to her two children, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that. Elliot was right; Patricia believed very much in self-determination and had done so for most of her existence. True, she had chosen to throw herself into the abyss of withdrawal, but she knew that what was about to follow would be entirely outside her control. She was also going to have to trust Bev and Eli, and trust wasn't something that came easily to her.

Patricia watched Elliot gather up her stash of painkillers, listening with only half an ear to Beverly's assurance that they would go to the blood bank for her. *Will this bring me closer to them? Or just drive us apart? Will I be able to bear myself when this is over?* She sighed internally. *Only one way to find out...*