

Pride Before Fall

By Kelly Meding

No matter the care he took in his approach to the empty lot beneath the freeway overpass, Tybalt Monahan knew his arrival would be detected. He moved forward on soundless feet, keeping his breathing low and controlled, even though his stomach had twisted into a cold knot of trepidation. Three a.m. meetings in the dark underbelly of Mercy's Lot were not unusual for him as a Triad Hunter, and Tybalt had been trained relentlessly in self-defense and attack techniques. He could handle himself against anything, human or otherwise, that chose to pop out of the shadows.

He wasn't nervous about the location. He was nervous about meeting Marcus.

The lot was the size of a baseball diamond, surrounded on three sides by the rough brick surfaces of still-standing row houses. A few neighboring lights burned brightly, in sharp contrast to the pre-dawn darkness left by the heavy cloud cover and burned-out street lamps. Haphazard piles of rubble dotted the lot's dirt-and-dried-grass landscape, offering little in the way of hiding places.

But Marcus didn't need a hiding place to effectively sneak up on him.

The slight incline across the street put the front stoops of a dozen homes several feet from the sidewalk. Tybalt crouched next to one stoop, melting into the shadows, watching the lot. No one moved. Ten minutes passed, and he heard a single gunshot, distant and not his business. Marcus wouldn't have contacted him if it wasn't urgent, but Tybalt refused to show himself first. If Marcus was there, he'd know Tybalt had arrived by sense of smell alone.

The Felia had amazing senses of smell.

Several more minutes passed. The first gentle aches of stiffness began in his knees, reminders of the uncomfortable, half-crouched position he'd chosen. A slight breeze stirred the cool spring air and brought a familiar, musky scent from his right side.

*Hellfire.*

He turned his head to look. Adrenaline spiked along his nerves, twisting his stomach impossibly tighter and filling his mouth with a sharp, metal flavor.

A fully-grown jaguar crouched on the stoop of the neighboring house, watching him with shimmering, golden brown eyes. It blinked and opened powerful jaws to display long rows of teeth as thick as Tybalt's fingers. A fat, pink tongue lolled to one side of its mouth, as if the massive beast were smiling at him.

Or sizing him up for a snack.

Tybalt held the creature's gaze until his knees screamed for release from the pressure and his neck ached from the awkward position. Finally, the large cat blinked and leapt to the sidewalk with one powerful push of its hind legs. Tybalt stood as gracefully as his stiff body allowed and held his ground as the jaguar approached.

"Hey, Marcus," Tybalt said as breezily as he could manage with a dry mouth. Swallowing hard enough to properly moisten his tongue was a subtle display of weakness the were-cat would notice.

The jaguar sniffed his hand with a dry nose. Tybalt had been careful to wash his hands free of any scent of metal or gun oil. He'd been on patrol with his Triad teammates until midnight, and the linger odor of handling weapons could also be construed as a threat. Tybalt knew the subtle techniques necessary for a positive interaction with the Felia.

Marcus tilted his massive head and looked up. He blinked once, then turned and loped across the street toward the empty lot. Tybalt followed a beat later, sore joints aching and hoping like hell no one still awake chose to look out their window and see a tall, twenty-two year old chasing a black jaguar across the street.

In the farthest, most shadowed corner of the lot, partially obscured from the street by a pile of crumbled bricks and mortar bits, Marcus shifted. His long tail disappeared. He reared up on hind legs that thinned out and reshaped. The black fur disappeared, replaced by a golden tan and a smattering of midnight hair on his chest, belly and upper thighs, leaving him completely nude. A shoulder-length curtain of black hair framed his face, which shaped out into the familiar long-nosed and thick-browed visage Tybalt remembered so well from his childhood.

He'd aged, which both did and did not surprise Tybalt. Weres aged faster than humans, tumbling into physical puberty up to four times sooner than a human child. The aging slowed after they reached adulthood, but few weres lived longer than forty. Marcus had been alive for about ten years, and appeared to be in his mid-thirties. The last time Tybalt had seen him, he'd looked the sixteen years that Tybalt had been during his banishment from the Pride.

Familiar, long-buried feelings of betrayal and abandonment simmered to the surface, and Tybalt struggled hard to keep them tamped down. Losing his temper before Marcus told him why he was there would end the meeting on a sour—and potentially bloody—note.

"The Pride has ignored me for six years," Tybalt said, working hard to keep his rising anger out of his voice. "What do you want, Marcus?"

"Seamus is dying," Marcus replied. Grief crippled his words even as his expression remained stony and calm.

Tybalt jerked. His stomach ached like he'd been punched, and the careful control he'd managed to hold over his emotions fractured. He couldn't stop the way his mouth opened and no sounds came out. His mind roared at the declaration about a man who'd been as close to a father to him as anyone in Tybalt's life.

"Is he sick?" Tybalt asked when he found his voice.

"For a year now, yes. He has the Shadow."

The Shadow was what weres referred to as any sort of cancer. Because of their unique anatomy and genetic abnormalities, they couldn't seek treatment by traditional methods. Few were-scientists existed, and fewer still were able to do research into Dreg illnesses—not only for weres, but for any of the dozen or so species of creatures living in the city's underbelly. No chemotherapy existed for Dregs with cancer—only pain management and death.

Tybalt cleared his throat. "How long does he have?"

"Not long. Days."

The pang in his heart grew sharper. "Did he ask for me?" Why else had Marcus come, unless—?

"No, he didn't." In response to Tybalt's startled look, Marcus's expression softened into sympathy. "I'm sorry, brother. My uncle doesn't know I've come to you for help. I don't think he would have allowed it."

"Then why are you here?" Possessing the knowledge and being unable to rectify past mistakes with it jangled his nerves and ignited his anger. As did Marcus's "brother" endearment. They had been raised together, as close as brothers once—until a single mistake drove Tybalt from the first family he'd ever known. "I'd have found out he died after the fact, so why the hell are you here?" He clenched his right hand into a fist, aching to strike.

"He has been challenged as Alpha of the Pride."

Tybalt blinked. When an Alpha showed weakness, any other dominant Pride male could challenge him to a death battle—as long as the Alpha did not have a son old enough to challenge in his stead. "Seamus doesn't have to fight," Tybalt said. "Keenan can fight. He's your age, he's the Alpha's son and strong enough—" But Marcus's expression stopped him cold.

"Keenan is missing," Marcus said.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Tybalt pinched the bridge of his nose. It was all he could do to curb his rising temper. He had half a mind to knock Marcus down and beat him until the entire story poured out in a single chunk, rather than in frustrating drips and drabs. Tybalt had worked so hard to ferret away his anger and hide his pain at losing the only relationships in his life that had mattered—until he found the Triads and new friendships that helped him thrive, that is. But Marcus had chipped into his careful control in only a few minutes.

Tybalt opened his eyes. "Okay, tell me what's going on."

Marcus nodded. "Seamus first became ill about a year ago, but he was able to hide his weakness. Only a careful few knew of it, and no one outside of the Alpha's family discovered it until last week when he fainted during a Mating Ceremony. The challenge came soon after, which was five days ago, and a challenge must be answered within seven."

Two days left to either produce Keenan or fight himself, weak from the Shadow and likely to die quickly in bloody battle. It would change the dynamics of the Pride—and not necessarily for the better—if leadership switched to a new bloodline.

"Keenan has not been seen since the death of his mate six weeks ago," Marcus said.

Tybalt's hand jerked and the invisible vise on his heart squeezed tighter. Astrid was dead. Until the notion occurred to him, he never realized how much he wanted to see her again. In the back of his mind, he'd always wanted to apologize.

*Hellfire, and now it's too late.*

Marcus surprised him by touching his arm. "It wasn't Astrid, Tybalt. I know they were promised, but they never Mated."

The sense of relief he felt at a stranger's death should not have hit him so strongly. He had only assumed that, as promised mates, Astrid and Keenan were joined, no matter what had happened between Astrid and Tybalt. As the male involved—human or not—Tybalt had been the one punished for their indiscretions. Punished with banishment from the Pride and his unceremonious return to life among humans.

"Is she alive?" Tybalt asked.

"Yes, she is. After you were gone, she was sent to our people in the north. Keenan no longer wanted her, and no other dominant male would have her."

Tybalt's heart ached. He had simply assumed she would be fine, that her life among the Pride would remain intact, because of her position with Keenan. He'd been wrong for so many years. "I ruined her." Speaking the words chilled him.

"No." Marcus's hold on his arm tightened. "No, Astrid would never have settled into life as the mate of an Alpha. She was too spirited. You knew my sister well. You know what I mean. She may have been sent away, but it freed her, brother. She is content in her new life."

"Is she happy?" He wasn't sure why he asked. Maybe it would ease the hurt of knowing he'd been the reason she was sent away from the city and her family.

Marcus didn't respond right away. "Are you happy?"

Tybalt flashed a wry smile. "I'm content. Why am I here?"

"Because I'm asking for your help, King of Cats. The challenger is the Bengal tiger called Prentiss. His bloodline held leadership once, but lost it seven generations ago to mine. Until now, no Bengal has dared challenge for position of Alpha."

He remembered Prentiss well. The Bengals had been the most vocal against him during Tybalt's early years with the Pride. They decried the notion of the Alpha's family raising a human orphan, until Seamus challenged the next protester to a blood match. Prentiss had been a schoolmate of theirs, and Tybalt still carried scars on his torso from their brawls.

Tybalt had never been fully accepted by the Pride, only by the members who mattered most to his heart—the members he betrayed by falling in love with Astrid. But Seamus had once saved the life of a starving infant, abandoned in a trash can hours after birth. It was time to repay the debt.

"Who was the last to see Keenan?" he asked Marcus.

"We aren't certain." Marcus's eyes gleamed, excited by the impending hunt. "After Keenan's mate Starla passed, he went to see his father. Seamus says they didn't speak. Keenan stayed for an hour and then left. His home was empty and some of his things had been taken. No one has admitted to knowing of his plans."

"He may have left town on his own to clear his head."

"We've considered the possibility, but he knew how sick Seamus was. Even in his grief, he was steadfast in his duty as the Alpha's son. He would have returned by now. The challenge has not been kept a secret among the other Clans. Word has spread."

"You think someone has him?"

"It's our working theory, and it's why I came to you. As a Hunter, you know the pulse of the city. You know what happens on the streets. It's unlikely the Bengals have held him themselves. They would be executed if such a crime was discovered."

"But they could have contracted out."

"Yes."

"And you want me to use my contacts and dig."

"Yes."

"Without anyone finding out and without the Alpha's blessing."

"Yes."

"All right."

Marcus started, as though surprised Tybalt had agreed so quickly. "You'll help?"

Tybalt nodded, his mind already whirring. It was pre-dawn Tuesday, and he had until the end of Thursday before his Triad went back on rotation. The statute of limitations on the challenge ended in two days. He wouldn't need to explain his absence to his boss.

"I'm off Triad rotation as of tonight," Tybalt said. "Give me three hours to do some digging. There's a coffee shop on Church Street, six blocks from here. Meet me there."

"All right. Be safe, brother."

"Always am." He clasped Marcus's hand in a friendly shake and met his adopted brother's eyes. A half-decade of regret stared back at him. Tybalt nodded, then walked away.

#

A handful of well-placed calls to fellow Hunters in various Triads and to a friendly were-coyote snitch had garnered a name and a potential bead on the Dregs

holding Keenan. Tybalt brought the information to Sally's Coffee Shop half an hour before the scheduled meeting time, so he indulged in coffee, hash browns, and a Mexican omelet. He settled into a booth in the back of the narrow shop, facing the door, one of a dozen early-morning patrons, and dug into his greasy food.

He'd added a sugar pack to his third mug of burnt coffee when Marcus entered, trailed by a woman whose appearance sent a regiment of butterflies swirling through Tybalt's stomach. His courage fell to his shoes, and he barely managed to stand up and politely acknowledge Marcus first, and after him, Astrid.

She didn't seem to have changed physically—same long, black hair and golden eyes, sharp nose, narrow shoulders, and lean, tapered body. A few lines around her eyes hinted at age, and the gentle curve of toned muscles in her forearms told the tale of a more physical lifestyle. She carried herself like a predator, and not just because she was Felia. She'd been trained.

"Astrid," Tybalt said. At least this voice was not as dumbfounded as his brain. "Marcus didn't—"

"I made him bring me," she said.

He considered shaking her hand and ruled it out as being too awkward. A hug was too intimate. She seemed to sense his indecision and slid into the booth without prompting. Marcus sat next to her.

Tybalt waited until the waitress plunked down two more mugs of coffee before imparting his information. "I may know who's been babysitting the missing package," he said while the two were-jaguars fixed their coffee to taste.

"Who?" Marcus asked.

"Four Halfies have been taking turns sitting on something for the last six days. One of them was bragging about snacking on a big cat and a huge payday when their boss got what he wanted."

Marcus and Astrid were twin pictures of tension and anger. They didn't have to tear apart the information. It fit with Keenan's disappearance. The kidnapper's biggest mistake was trusting secrecy to a quartet of half-Blood vampires, whose combined brain power probably added up to the wattage of a flashlight bulb. Halfies made good muscle-for-hire, but their critical thinking capacities were severely limited, due to the influence of the infectious vampire parasite that turned them. Using half-Bloods was sloppy.

"How good is your intel?" Astrid asked.

"I trust my sources." He didn't need to tell them this information had come from the coyote. The Felia and Cania Clans were not friendly. "I also have a name that's come up in a couple of Triad investigations related to Halfies. Does Howard Castle ring any bells?" Blank looks answered him. "He frequently deals in street drugs, but he's been known to organize underground fights between Halfies. Puts them in a cage and lets them tear each other apart while people bet on a winner."

"Has he expanded his repertoire to kidnapping?" Marcus asked.

"He knows Halfies. If someone was looking to hire out, they could reasonably go to Castle, and he'd put them into contact with Halfies old enough to be somewhat in control of their infection and able to follow orders."

"So we take our questions to Howard Castle," Astrid said. "And we encourage him to tell us who these Halfies are and where they are hiding the package."

Tybalt gave her a sour look. "We?"

She bristled, a hardness in her eyes that hadn't existed a moment ago. "You aren't the only one who's grown up, Tybalt. You don't need to protect me any longer. No male does."

The curt words surprised him. The Astrid he remembered had never spoken back to a dominant male—not in his presence, at least.

"Do you know where to find Castle?" Marcus asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do." Tybalt sucked down the rest of coffee, savoring the burn. He didn't particularly want Astrid around until he knew the extent of her training. He'd seen Marcus fight, both as human and jaguar, but never her. He needed to believe she could defend herself if people got testy. He tossed some money on the table and said, "Let's go."

#

No red-blooded male, however suspicious or selfish, can resist the helpless smile of a beautiful woman—or so Astrid told him when she insisted that she knock on Castle's apartment door and beguile her way inside. And she had a point, though Tybalt loathed to admit it. She wasn't the awkward teenager he'd loved. He saw the changes in the way she walked, her shoulders back and steps firm. Her voice was clear and demanding, instead of timid and asking. Her eyes worried him the most, rimmed with a suspicion she directed at everyone, himself included.

*She's content*, Marcus had said.

And in complete charge of herself now. She stood in front of Castle's door and fluffed out her hair. Her posture wilted from confident to submissive, and she pinched her cheeks to add a faint blush.

Tybalt and Marcus hunched into the doorway of the fourth floor stairwell, twenty feet away and out of sight. Waiting for her signal. She knocked. They listened.

A door squealed. Astrid's "timid voice" didn't quite carry down to the stairwell and living with a species didn't grant him their hyper-senses. Tybalt still knew the script—pretend a friend gave her the wrong address, giggle, act helpless, then ask to use his phone. From the half-smile tweaking Marcus's mouth, it was going as planned.

Marcus held up three fingers, preparing for countdown. Tybalt nodded, ready. A peal of feminine laughter eased down the hall. Marcus folded one finger down, leaving two. More muffled words, then one finger standing. Marcus lowered the last finger, and the pair slipped from the stairwell with silent ease.

Astrid's foot disappeared from view inside the apartment door. Ten long strides put Tybalt in the frame, and he slammed his palm down on the door to stop Castle from closing it. The perp in question gave him a startled look, his meaty jowls jiggling as he shifted wide, understanding eyes between Tybalt and Astrid.

Marcus slipped around Tybalt's right side and pressed the muzzle of a .38 into the center of Castle's chest. "Scream, I dare you," Marcus snarled.

"What the hell is this?" Castle asked. His voice was a little too high-pitched and feminine for his thick frame, out of sync with the oily black hair and untrimmed mustache.

Tybalt closed the door and turned the deadbolt. Between himself and the two were-cats, they easily herded Castle down the narrow hall and into the living room. The odors of stale cigarette smoke and old beer stung Tybalt's nose; he could only imagine what his companions smelled.

"If this is about the fight two nights ago, I tell you again, it was a fair—" Castle started raving, the whites of his eyes showing.

Marcus smashed the butt of the gun down just above Castle's left knee, and the man fell with a pained snort. "I don't give a damn about your underground half-Blood fights," he said, danger in his voice. His golden eyes flashed, hints of his true form begging to get out and do some damage.

Tybalt crouched to eye-level, careful to keep out of kicking distance. "Mr. Castle, we're here inquiring about any contacts you've had in the last two weeks regarding the hiring of Halfies to guard something of value."

Castle couldn't stop the flash of fear that stole across his face, even though he immediately hid it behind a mask of confusion. "Don't know what you mean—"

A feline growl stopped him cold. He twisted his head to the left and came face to face with a spotted jaguar, her mouth open and saliva dripping from pencil-thick incisors. His skin went the color of rice pudding.

Tybalt hadn't heard Astrid strip or seen her change. She was fast. She was also intimidating their perp, if the wet mark spreading from his crotch to the legs of his tan trousers was any indication. The sharp odor of urine joined the apartment's melody of awful fragrances.

"Shit," Castle said.

"Are you certain you don't know what we're talking about?" Tybalt asked.

Castle licked his lips as a fine sheen of sweat broke across his forehead. "I, uh...if you don't catch them, I'm dead."

Astrid growled, mimicking her quarry with a long, slow roll of her tongue over teeth. Castle started breathing harder.

"You're dead if you don't cooperate with us right now," Marcus said.

Tybalt did not doubt Marcus's sincerity. Both of the Felia in his company would gladly rip the cowering man to shreds for his involvement in the abduction of a Clan

member. As a Triad Hunter, though, Tybalt was duty-bound to stop them. Triads protected the city's human population from the Dregs. Open attack of humans was a crime punishable by death to any Dreg who was caught doing it—were, vampire, half-Blood, goblin, all faced the same end. In his four years as a Hunter, Tybalt had never hesitated to fulfill his duty.

He'd also never had to execute one of the Felia. Could he kill two of his dearest childhood friends?

He didn't care to find himself faced with answering such a question. "Mr. Castle," Tybalt said more firmly than before, "we're under a bit of a time crunch here. So my advice is this: if you want to live, tell us what we want to know before my companion gets twitchy. Then do not leave this apartment for the next two days. Trust me, the people we're looking for won't be coming after you once we're through with them."

Castle's gaze flickered around the room, lingering on Tybalt the longest, until he heaved a put-upon sigh. "Guy approached me last week with a big wad of cash in his fist," he said in a tone he might use if confessing to a multiple murder—flat and beaten. "Said he needed at least four half-Bloods he could trust to sit on a package and not eat it. Cash was mine if I could give him the names next day. I said I'd have them in a couple of hours. Brought seven of the oldest, most controlled I knew. He picked four, gave me the money, and said if I talked I'd end up as kitty kibble."

He glanced at Astrid, his face ashen. "I thought for a minute he sent you guys to kill me anyway. I don't like messing with Clan business. Nothing but trouble, that."

"Wise words," Tybalt said. "You get a name?"

"Smith."

Marcus snorted.

Tybalt ignored him. "What did he look like?"

"Average white guy, maybe your height, brown hair and eyes. Nothing real special."

It could describe Prentiss, as well as several thousand other people in the city. "Those Halfies you hired out have been bragging around like frat boys who just banged the head cheerleader. Who would they brag to about what they're babysitting? Who'd know where they are?"

"No way. I snitch on them, and I might as well pack up and leave the city."

"At least you'd be leaving with your life intact. You know dangerous people, Mr. Castle, and you live on the edge of the law. Maybe it's time to reconsider your career choices and put down roots someplace else." Tybalt was outside of his usual Hunter territory, and he knew he was stepping on uneven ground with his statements. He'd found Castle because other Hunters knew about him—if they were watching Castle or using him for information, he was going against Triad policy. They'd know it was him.

He was torn.

"After we've gone, you'll have plenty of time to ponder your life," Marcus said. "Right now, you have thirty seconds before my feline companion finds out what your fingers taste like. One at a time."

Castle made a sad choking sound and fastened his watery stare on Tybalt. "Them I expect this from, kid, but you? Getting leaned on by another human who's playing with animals?"

Astrid growled.

Tybalt bristled, his right hand twitching, eager to strike and release the furious swirl of emotions bubbling inside him. "Ironic coming from someone so deep in with the godforsaken Halfies. You gave up your Human Race membership card when you started

turning the misfortune of others into a high-stakes gambling sport, so save me your indignation. Where?"

"Southbank Street," Castle said. His lips curled back from his teeth. "Between Falston and Granger. A bunch of them nest in the basement of the Vinyl Store."

"Vinyl Store?" Marcus asked.

"Yeah, vinyl, records, LP's. You heard of them, kitty cat?"

This time Marcus growled—a sound so deep in his chest that Tybalt knew it was his jaguar aching to get out. "All right then," Marcus said. "As much as I'd like to say thanks and I trust you to not rat us out the second we leave your apartment"—he slammed the butt of his gun against the back of Castle's head, and the large man crumpled to the floor—"I don't."

Sheer habit had Tybalt crouching long enough to find a steady pulse. As he stood up, he got a peripheral eye-full of a very naked Astrid standing a few feet away, dressing. He angled away from her and didn't realize he had his cell phone out and open until Marcus asked, "Who are you calling?"

Tybalt gazed at the phone. He'd been about to call his boss and Handler, Gina Kismet. She led and looked out for his Triad, and years of training told him to report Howard Castle so she could take appropriate measures to ensure the real police picked him up. He put the phone back in his jeans pocket. If he made the call, Castle might tell her who he'd been here with and why. He couldn't risk Triad interference, not yet. He wasn't even supposed to be involved in Clan business, and after the mess the Triads made at the Sunset Terrace Apartments last week, none of the were-Clans trusted humans.

"No one," he finally said. "Habit." When Marcus produced his own phone, Tybalt stared. "Who are you calling?"

"Someone to come pick up this piece of shit," Marcus replied. "We will need him to testify to the Pride, in order to discredit Prentiss's challenge."

Astrid joined them, shooting Marcus a baleful look. "Eat his fingers? Really?"

Marcus shrugged as he dialed. "He believed it."

"Gross."

#

Tybalt put Intimidation Tactics 101 to good use at the Vinyl Store. The clerk behind the dingy counter had at least a dozen needle marks hidden beneath his long-sleeved, flannel shirt, and it only took one painful twist of his wrist and a single threat of police involvement before the boy showed them the basement door. He also babbled half a dozen confessions, ranging from selling his blood to the Halfies after he'd shot up with heroin—which apparently gave the Halfies quite a high—to stealing a walker from his ancient next door neighbor. The walker made no sense, but Tybalt had learned long ago to not bother questioning the motivations of a junkie.

The basement door was in the stock room, such as it was—a cubby hole with a cot, a mini-fridge, and a few shelves of supplies, as well as a toilet and sink hidden behind a folding paper screen. It reeked of mildew and the faint odor of rot. The clerk said four of them had come in before dawn.

After locking the front door, they turned the sign to Closed, knocked out the clerk, and dumped him on his cot. Tybalt checked his gun clip while Marcus and Astrid both stripped and shifted. He had only a regular clip on him, instead of the anti-coagulant rounds he'd normally carry into a situation involving Halfies. Unless he got them right in the head and blew out their brains, regular bullets wouldn't kill the Halfies fast enough. And they needed at least one alive.

So far, the basement below remained silent of movement. Halfies were sun-sensitive, like the full-Bloods, which gave them nocturnal habits and often meant sleeping during the day—also not unlike Hunters. If they were lucky, they'd caught the nest deep in slumber and subduing them would be fast and relatively bloodless.

Tybalt reached for the basement door, his stomach tightening into a knot of apprehension—the same knot he'd gotten for four years, every time he went into a similar situation. The Halfies couldn't infect the were-cats, but they could infect him with something as simple as a fang slice on his palm. Every Hunter he knew would rather die than turn, and Tybalt was no exception.

He swung the door open, and it squealed on rusty hinges. Marcus bolted past him, a smear of black, and Astrid's black and tan streaked down next. Tybalt waited two beats, then flipped the light switch on the exterior wall. Somewhere below, a dim bulb glowed and someone shouted. He took the rickety wood steps two at a time and descended into chaos.

Humid air reeked of waste and old blood. Dirty mattresses were placed haphazardly around on the cement floor, and the four Halfies were in various stages of waking and fighting. One of them took a direct hit from Marcus's massive paw and slammed against the far wall, then crumpled to the ground. Astrid landed on a Halfie who hadn't gotten off his mattress yet, clamped powerful jaws down around his left shoulder and started to chew. The Halfie shrieked.

Tybalt angled toward the room's only female Halfie, her luminescent eyes wide in terror and white-streaked hair flying in wild ringlets about her head. She wound up a sloppy punch, and he landed a high-kick smoothly to her forehead. Her head snapped back and she fell on her ass with a grunt. Covering her with the gun, he said, "Stay down, or I put one in your face."

She snarled, baring fangs barely formed—she hadn't been turned long ago, maybe two weeks. And judging from her skimpy attire of tankini and panties, as well as the bruises decorating her neck, shoulders and thighs, she'd been brought in for entertainment. She stayed down.

Tybalt let his peripheral vision tell him what was happening, unwilling to take his eyes off his quarry. Astrid appeared to have finished chewing the arms off her Halfie—it flopped on the floor, screaming and kicking and bleeding a goopy, purplish-red. She was rubbing her muzzle against one of the mattresses, wiping blood out of her whiskers. Marcus's first Halfie was still unconscious, and the remaining one was trapped in a sprawl beneath the jaguar's great weight. Even the strength inherited from the vampire parasite couldn't dislodge two-hundred pounds of cat holding down all four limbs.

The curly-haired female let loose a string of curses, even as tears dribbled down her cheeks. Beneath Marcus came a muffled question: "What the hell do you want?"

Marcus snarled.

"Something tells me you already know," Tybalt said, attention still on the female. "Where are they?"

"Where's who?"

Marcus flexed his front paws, allowing thick claws to dig into the Halfie's forearms. The prisoner squealed.

"You've got two choices." Tybalt made his voice loud and commanding, so all the Halfies knew he was addressing them, as well. "You can die fast and relatively pain-free, or you can go piece by piece, like your armless friend over there."

The female's eyes widened and she craned her neck to stare at the moaning wretch behind her. "You don't have to kill me," she said. Looking back to Tybalt, she

attempted a sultry smile that came off as constipated, and ran her fingers down the front of her chest, between her meager breasts. "I'll do anything you want, handsome."

Tybalt didn't say out loud that all he wanted her to do was die with dignity and be freed her of miserable half-Blood existence. No longer human and never fully vampire, she had no world in which to belong. No place in the city he protected. He chambered a round and aimed for her nose. "Tell me where they're keeping him," he said.

Just like an animal backed into a corner, she tensed and hissed. Astrid padded over to Tybalt's right side and stood, her broad shoulder almost waist-high on him. She licked her lips and hissed right back, blood still staining the front of her face. The female Halfie gulped.

"Astrid," Tybalt said, "start with her left leg."

The Halfie shrieked in ear-piercing terror. "The abandoned motel south of the city, Green Acres Lodge, near the old freeway exchange. He's there, in one of the rooms on the forest-side. Don't let her eat me!"

Tybalt silenced her with one round to her forehead and two into her heart. He systematically put the armless Halfie out its misery, and then the still-unconscious one, three bullets each. He kept count of the fifteen-round clip, unsure if he'd be able to resupply before this ended. Meanwhile, Marcus had separated his quarry's head from its neck, producing an impressive gout of blood that oozed across the basement floor. The entire subterranean space reeked of death.

"I'm not familiar with that motel," Astrid said, and Tybalt jumped. She stood next to him, stark naked, with blood on her shin and cheeks and hands.

Growing up around weres had quickly shed his inhibitions about nudity, but something about seeing his once-time girlfriend, the first girl—no, woman—he'd ever loved or slept with, in her birthday suit actually made him blush. He kept his eyes up,

even though everything below her chin tempted him to admire it. Compare the now with what he remembered from then.

"I know where it is," Tybalt said. He holstered his gun. "It'll take us about twenty minutes or so, depending on traffic."

"Then let's go," she replied, already pivoting toward the stairs.

Tybalt gave her and Marcus a slight head start so they could change. He gazed around the blood-soaked basement. Four dead Halfies with just a couple hours work on a case he wasn't supposed to be involved in—not bad.

He produced his phone, dialing out of habit rather than thought. After four rings, the other end picked up, and the sleep-raspy voice of his Triad partner muttered that this better be an emergency. Tybalt smiled. "Milo," he said, "I need a favor."

#

Milo's uncanny ability to extract information from almost any computer had helped their Triad time and again in the fifteen months since he was assigned, so Tybalt kept his phone handy. To his credit, Milo hadn't asked why he needed the requested information, and it arrived on Tybalt's phone ten minutes later. They were halfway across the city, moving quickly through early afternoon traffic.

"What is that?" Astrid asked from the backseat.

"Floor plan for the motel," he replied, holding the phone up so she could see the screen. It was single-story, with rooms on both sides of a long, L-shaped building. The short end of the L had once held the office and a small diner. The inside of the L faced the mountains, and he guessed their package to be in one of the two rooms on either side of the right angle. Room twenty or twenty-one.

He enhanced that section and studied the rooms around it. Astrid leaned forward, her breath tickling his ear. He tried to ignore the distraction and focus on a plan. The

duct-work was too narrow to be useful, and none of the rooms were adjoining—as an old trucker's motel, it made sense.

"Frontal assault won't help us," he said. "They have the defensive positions, and we aren't even certain which room he's in. We could try surveillance from the trees, but the Halfies may scent us before we get into position." It was also likely Prentiss had paid someone to lay a few traps, just in case someone got noseey.

"We need a distraction to draw them out of the room and to us," Astrid said.

"Exactly. Halfies are easily distracted by violence, but you and Marcus fake-fighting is too obvious. We need someone outside the Pride."

"I know someone from the Ursia Clan who owes me a favor," Marcus said from the driver's seat. "With the two of us out in the woods making some noise, it's bound to get the Halfies' attention."

"Grizzly?" Tybalt asked.

"Black bear, actually."

"Do I want to know why he owes you a favor?"

"She, and no, you don't want to know." The little smile tugging at Marcus's mouth hinted at a good story, but Tybalt didn't press.

Marcus called in his favor.

#

The dented footlocker in the rear of Marcus's Jeep contained a plethora of useful roadside items—a flashlight and batteries, first aid kit, road flares, and bottled water. In the compartment beneath it, Tybalt found the more useful items—binoculars, two Bowie knives, a pair of Glocks, and four clips of ammunition. He helped himself to the

binoculars, one of the knives, and a Glock as backup for his own weapon, which was down to only six bullets.

They'd parked a mile off the city bypass exit, still a mile from the motel. Marcus had already shifted and disappeared into the forest to meet up with his were-bear friend. Tybalt and Astrid were going to hoof it halfway on the road, then detour into the woods and wait.

Alone with Astrid for the first time in six years, he felt the weight of so many unsaid things holding down his tongue. She seemed content to walk in silence and let the past stay in the past, so he didn't press. As soon as they had Keenan, their involvement was over. Opening up old wounds was a waste of time.

*Wasn't it?*

But he'd never been afraid to speak his mind to someone. He stopped walking, and it took Astrid three strides to notice. She turned, her lovely face asking a silent question. "I'm sorry," he said, nearly choking on the simple words.

She frowned. "For what?"

It was his turn to frown. "What do you mean, for what?"

"You didn't do anything wrong, Tybalt."

"I know Pride tradition, Astrid, and as the male, it was my responsibility—"

She held up one hand, palm to him, her expression stormy. "Stop right there. I was the aggressor, Tybalt. I came to your room that night. And I was the only actual Felia involved in our affair, which makes it my responsibility, not yours. If anyone should apologize, it's me. I damned the consequences and went full-steam ahead."

"I didn't exactly protest."

He'd been sixteen for two months. She'd reached maturity only a few weeks prior. Even though he was so many years older, even though he remembered the day she

was born, it had never felt awkward. He'd fallen in love hard and fast and, even promised to Keenan, she'd reciprocated. Their only night together had been both beautiful and awkward. Until Keenan found them.

"I used you, Tybalt."

The admission stung like a slap. He took a half-step backward before noticing and stopped his retreat.

"I didn't want to be Keenan's," she went on, her words a rushed whisper on the silent road. "I didn't want the role of the future Alpha's mate. It wasn't me. I think it's why I was so drawn to you. You were human and you were handsome, and I knew I couldn't have you, either."

Anger stole in and squeezed his chest. "You slept with me so Keenan would reject you," he said coldly.

"Yes." Her voice cracked on the word, giving it less oomph than she probably intended. Lying now or lying then; it didn't matter. If he despised one trait in a person, it was deceitfulness. He'd seen and done too much in his brief life to be anything except forthright, and he felt he deserved nothing less from the people around him.

"I never thought they'd send you away," she said. "Truly, I didn't."

"Forget it," he snapped. "You got what you wanted—no Keenan and a new life elsewhere."

"But you didn't—"

"I said forget it." Ice coated his words. She flinched and he didn't care. He was finished with the conversation, and he felt like an ass for apologizing in the first place. No wonder she'd barely spoken to him all day. "Look, let's do this so we can save the next Alpha and go our separate ways."

She nodded, silent, her expression completely shuttered. They picked up the pace and veered into the woods a few minutes later. Tybalt waited while she undressed and shifted. He tucked her clothes under his arm, feeling oddly less vulnerable in the presence of a hundred-and-seventy pound cat than a five-foot-five woman.

He followed her through the woods, up the rocky incline of the mountains around them. She paused on the flat surface of a jutting boulder and crouched low. Tybalt knelt next to her, put her clothes down on a patch of dead leaves, then used the binoculars to peer through thick brown branches lightly dotted with spring leaves. Below them, about a hundred yards away, was the motel parking lot and rear rooms. He had a slightly obscured view of rooms twenty and twenty-one. A rusty VW Bug was parked sideways near both doors, the driver unconcerned with parking spaces.

"I don't see anyone," he whispered. He hadn't expected to find them hanging around outside smoking cigarettes. Halfies had a higher sun tolerance than full-Bloods, but they still scorched to death in about five minutes. It was a smelly, slow way to die, and he was grateful for the heavy clouds mottling the sky—spring rainstorms would be their ally today and help obscure the afternoon sunshine.

Minutes ticked down. A breeze picked up, rustling through the otherwise silent forest. The air thickened with the heavy scent of approaching rain. Next to him, Astrid tensed. Her long, thick tail swished.

Tybalt nearly jumped out of his skin when a long, loud roar rumbled across the mountainside—a furious sound only an incensed bear could make. Even Astrid's ears flattened. The lady-scream of a furious jaguar answered the bear. It was on. He couldn't see the fight, but they made it loud—roars and screams and snapping branches created a cacophony of fearsome noise.

Fearsome enough to draw the attention of the motel's occupants. The door to motel room twenty swung open. Tybalt squinted through the binoculars, taking in the man's thick paunch and stained wife-beater tee and the blotched-white hair. A second Halfie joined him on the porch, this one short and skinny—couldn't be older than fourteen, the poor bastard.

White Tee pointed to his left, up into the mountainside, his mouth moving. Kid nodded and ducked back into the room. A moment later, he raced outside in a hooded sweatshirt, a second kid of equal size and dress hot on his heels. They ran across the parking lot and into the woods, out of view.

"Leaves at least one, maybe two watching Keenan," Tybalt whispered, more for himself than Astrid. She could see without the binoculars. She looked at him and ran her thick tongue across whiskered lips. Her expression seemed to say *Time to have fun?*

She led the way on silent paws. Tybalt traded the binoculars for a gun and followed her down. At the tree line, they circled wide toward the blunt end of the L-shaped motel. Out of sight of the room, they crossed the parking lot to the constant sound of a bear and jaguar fighting. Very soon, he hoped to hear the shrieks of dying Halfies.

At the end of the L, Tybalt hazarded a peek around the corner. White Tee still stood in the doorway, arms folded above his belly, glaring into the woods. Astrid nudged his thigh with her head, and he looked down. Held up two fingers. She shook her head. Three fingers. Nod.

An extra Halfie, which meant two inside the room with Keenan. Tybalt held up his gun, then tilted his head. She gave another jerky nod, then stepped a little the side—ready to spring the moment he fired.

Tybalt took a steadying breath, adrenaline already rising to peak levels. He lived for this part of the hunt—the kill. He thumbed off the safety, swung around into view, and unloaded three rounds in quick succession. Two hit White Tee between the eyes, and the third struck his chest, right in the heart. White Tee didn't scream. He just slumped to the ground.

Astrid was a blur of brown and tan, and she dashed into the motel room at the same moment White Tee smashed into the sidewalk. Two voices began shouting. She roared once, and then someone screamed. Tybalt ran toward the room, swapping his gun for the fully-loaded Glock. A gunshot shattered something inside. A bitter taste splashed the back of Tybalt's tongue.

Two more shots rang out. Tybalt pressed his back to the wall just outside the door. A shot whizzed out the door and spider-webbed the VW's windshield. Something metal groaned and squealed. A second cat-roar joined Astrid's, and a cold wash of fear gripped Tybalt's heart. Man-like screaming started, then was cut off with a loud gasp.

Tybalt swung into the doorway, gun hand braced on his left palm. Blood splashed the floor and walls nearest the door in abstract patterns. Two broken Halfies lay in the mess, one near the door and one on the room's only king-sized bed. A large metal cage took up the rear corner of the room, its door broken and hanging by a hinge. None of it bothered him—he was used to blood and dead Halfies and general destruction.

But he stopped cold at the sight of a massive jaguar, larger even than Marcus, crouching over Astrid's prostrate body. Keenan's sheer mass of muscle and ebony fur dwarfed the smaller cat. Blood dripped from his canines onto the lighter fur of Astrid's exposed throat. She'd shown him her throat and belly, a gesture of submission to a dominant Pride member—why?

Keenan looked up, his copper eyes glimmering with rage and confusion and pain, and Tybalt understood immediately. The Halfies had been torturing him, and Keenan was losing the battle against his own beast. The blood on his teeth wasn't Astrid's, though, and with a terrible clarity, Tybalt knew that if it had been, he'd have shot Keenan without a second thought. But Keenan was fighting it.

The jaguar roared. Tybalt flinched and, as slowly as coursing adrenaline would allow, he lowered his gun to the floor. His body followed until he was crouched on his hands and knees, head lowered. Keenan growled. He gave Astrid's throat a sniff, then stalked across the room to Tybalt. Blood squished beneath his massive paws.

Heart jack-hammering against his ribs, Tybalt fought his initial instinct to show dominance to this creature. It would only get him killed. Instead, he lay on his side, then rolled onto his back, mimicking Astrid's submissive posture and hating himself for it.

Keenan snuffled against his throat, then down to his chest. Tybalt struggled to remain relaxed, and to not imagine those powerful jaws suddenly taking a bite out of his exposed belly. If Keenan licked his lips or even opened his mouth, Tybalt was sure he'd piss himself in sheer terror.

Instead, Keenan's entire body shuddered. He loped a few steps away, then collapsed on a semi-dry spot on the carpet. Tybalt sat up, struggling to breathe normally. Keenan started shifting back to human form. Human-Astrid bolted past him with a blanket in her arms and crouched, buck naked, next to Keenan. She draped the bed's coverlet over him and leaned down to whisper something in his ear. He must have replied, because she smiled.

Tybalt struggled to get up and finally made it to two shaky legs. The fighting had silenced outside. He peered out, over the slowly rotting body of White Tee, across the parking lot. Two naked people, one man and one woman, emerged from the woods, and

he looked away. When he had his muscles back under control, he'd go back for Astrid's clothes.

For the moment, he leaned against the door frame, grateful to have the Felia Pride's next born Alpha back. Grateful, as well, for the unloading of a six-year burden of guilt.

#

The cryptic message Tybalt received two days later fell into the "I don't have time for this" column of current events. His world had complicated itself beyond reason, with one Triad Handler missing, another Handler off the reservation, and a lot of rumors swirling around about alliances, spells, and payback. His own Triad had been put back on rotation early to help search for the missing Handler.

Tybalt was patrolling the rear alley of an apartment complex, half a block from his Triad partners, when the text appeared on his cell: Church Street 1 Hour. He didn't recognize the number, and he didn't know how his had gotten out. The phone was for Triad-related calls only, and he hadn't given it to anyone in his four years as a Hunter.

Church Street had to mean the coffee shop from a few days ago. He hadn't heard from Marcus since being dropped off at his apartment an hour after Keenan's rescue. He was only a few blocks from Church. His partners would cover for him if he asked, which was why he was sliding into the shop's back booth less than an hour later.

He expected Marcus. He got Astrid. She strode toward him, bright-eyed and confident in her crisp suit jacket and skirt, even though it was one o'clock in the morning. He didn't get up as she slid in across from him. The waitress poured her a cup of coffee, then wandered back behind the counter to chat up the night cook.

Tybalt fiddled with his mug handle.

"Howard Castle testified in front of the Assembly of Clan Elders," she finally said. "Against Prentiss."

That had his attention. The Assembly was the ruling body of the city's Clans, with one elected Elder from each acting as sole voice of the Clan. Seamus was Alpha of the Felia Pride, but he was not the Clan Elder—that honor fell to his uncle, Marcus's grandfather. One day, the honor of Elder would pass to Marcus. That Castle had been called in front of the Assembly—something he'd never heard of with a human—was a big deal.

"What was their decision?" Tybalt asked without looking away from his cup of coffee.

"Prentiss was found guilty of conspiracy, kidnapping, and attempted murder of the Pride's Alpha."

He didn't have to ask what the penalty was for such a thing. "Has he been executed yet?"

"Sunrise. Keenan gets the honor of removing the bastard's head." She sounded disappointed. Perhaps she'd wanted to do it herself.

Instead of being happy that justice was served, he felt a surge of frustration. "You could have told me this over the phone, Astrid. I'm working. I have a job I can't just drop when you need me—"

"I needed to see you one more time."

He looked at her then, meeting her copper gaze. Her eyes glimmered a little too brightly. She seemed older than she had just two days ago, weary, but still very much like the teenager he'd once thought he loved. "Why?" he asked, no venom in the question, just bald curiosity.

"Because things are changing, Tybalt, and the Assembly..." She chewed on her lower lip. "The Assembly isn't going to continue rolling over for the Triads and allowing humans so much power over us."

Mental alarms clanged in his head. She knew the mind of the Assembly. Her actions during their brief time together had been predatory, skilled, and spoke of training. It all made sense. "You work for the Assembly now, don't you?"

She nodded.

"I thought they had a liaison."

"We do. Think of him as diplomacy and me as investigations. Things are changing, Tybalt, and the next time we meet may not be as allies. If it comes down to that, I want to know—no, I need to know you forgive me. I hurt you terribly six years ago, and I am truly sorry."

He still couldn't wrap his mind around what she was saying about the Assembly. Every inhuman species in the city either submitted to the rule of humans and the Triads, or they were hunted into submission. The Assembly, and by extension, the entire were community, had abided by the Triads' rules for a decade. Change meant conflict, and conflict usually meant bloodshed.

"Tybalt?"

"I forgive you," he said without thinking. And he did. At the time, being abandoned by the Pride felt like drowning—he didn't think he'd survive the loss. Then he found the Triads. He'd made a place for himself and earned a position in a family who would never abandon him. A family he'd have never found without her. "I think we both ended up where we were supposed to be, don't you?"

She smiled. "Yes, I think so."

Neither of them spoke for several minutes. Then Tybalt pulled some money out of his pocket and gulped down the last of his coffee.

"I need to get back," he said, sliding across the smooth vinyl to stand.

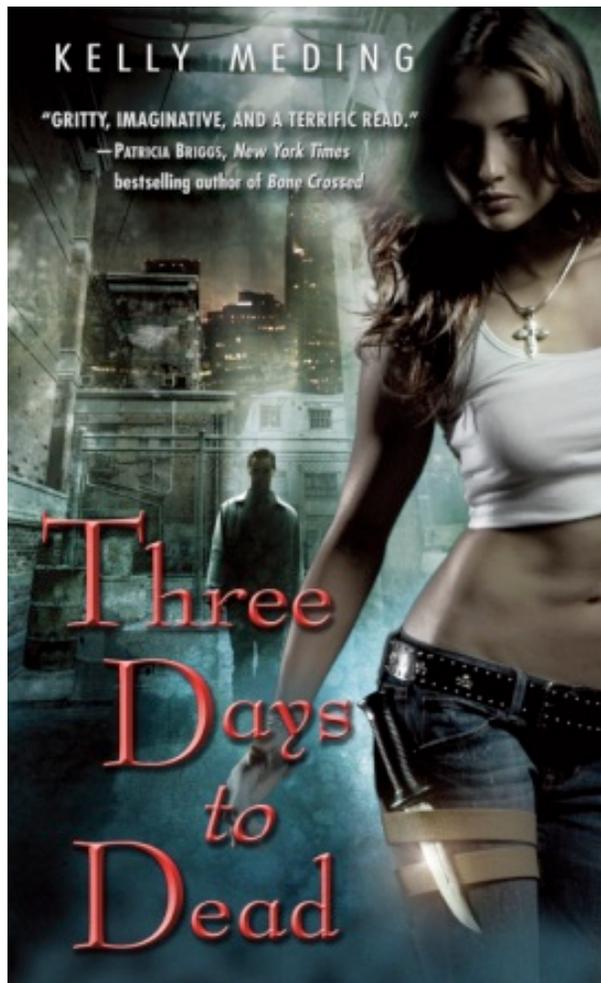
She remained seated, smiling up at him with a hint of relief softening the lines around her eyes. "Take care of yourself, King of Cats."

"You, too."

He left her in the coffee shop on Church Street and returned to his patrol with this new Assembly information nagging at the back of his mind. Astrid hadn't sworn him to silence. She gave it up freely, perhaps to thank him for his help with Keenan. It was his to do with as he wished.

Did he tell his superiors, or did he keep it to himself? And could he live with either decision?

He'd decide tomorrow; today he had a missing Handler to find.



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