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Dahlia Lynley-Chivers looked good in black; in fact, she looked great—and normally that was extremely important to her. But tonight she wasn't thinking about herself or about the picture she made sitting alone at the elaborately laid table in the upscale restaurant. Seeleys' tablecloths might have been designed to set her looks off: the undercloth was black like her hair; the overcloth was snowy white like her skin.

Dahlia had been dead for a very long time. Though she was sitting motionless, her back perfectly straight, Dahlia was conscious of the passing of time. The witch was late. Under any other circumstances, she would have left Seeleys and found something more amusing to do than wait for a human: but she'd gone to considerable trouble to arrange this meeting, and she wouldn't give up so easily.

Clifford Seeley, who'd arranged to wait tables at his dad's restaurant this evening, put a glass of TrueBlood in front of Dahlia with a theatrical flourish. "Something to sip on while you wait, madam," he said formally. Then he whispered, "I haven't worked here since I was twenty. Am I doing okay?"

Dahlia didn't exactly smile. She wasn't in the mood. But her face looked a bit less stony as she looked up at the tall young werewolf, and she inclined her head an infinitesimal degree. She liked Clifford, had since the moment she'd met him at her friend Taffy's wedding reception. Taffy, like Dahlia, had married into the Swiftfoot pack.

Taffy's husband Don was the packleader. Dahlia's husband was dead.

"Heads up," said Clifford suddenly, and swooped off to check his other tables. Dahlia saw the headwaiter gliding toward her, a young woman stumbling along behind him. Dahlia's attention sharpened. Since on their dullest day vampires had senses at least five times more acute than those of humans, this meant Dahlia might as well have been walking right next to the newcomer. The woman was plump, tousled, and breathing heavily, and she didn't seem to know how to walk on high heels. Dahlia, who wore stilettos on every possible occasion, let her nostrils flare in contempt, though she made sure to repress any expression well before the young woman reached her chair. That took longer than it should have, since Dahlia's guest was not Ms. Fitness.

When the newcomer was seated, considerable fuss ensued until she found a place for her purse, yanked at the shoulder of her dress, tossed her

head so her long red hair would hang behind her shoulders, and asked the headwaiter for some water. (He replied, "I'll send your waiter, Clifford, right over," in a rather stiff voice.)

"I'm so sorry I'm late, Mrs. Swiftfoot. I caught the wrong bus, and after that, everything else seemed to go wrong," the young woman said.

Dahlia studied her silently. Making people squirm was something Dahlia did very well. "You are the Circe, the witch?" Dahlia said finally, in her frostiest voice. But her tone was not as cutting as she could make it. Dahlia had gone to too much trouble setting up the meeting to go overboard with the hostility.

"Yes, oh, yes, I didn't introduce myself!" The young witch giggled, tossed her head again. "I'm not the original Circe, of course. That was my—well, my many-times great-grandmother. But I'm the direct descendant, yes."

"And you are a trained witch?"

"Oh, yes, I went to school and everything." The Circe wore glasses, and she blinked anxiously at the tiny vampire across the table. "I graduated with honors."

"I was under the impression that witches were taught by their predecessors," Dahlia said. "I understood that the knowledge was passed along by word of mouth, and in the family grimoire. There's no—Hogwarts in your past, I presume?" The reference to Harry Potter was a real stretch for Dahlia, who tracked current culture with some effort. Dahlia had ventured the mild pleasantries to put the panting young woman at ease, but Dahlia was not terribly adept at mild or pleasant.

The Circe recoiled. "No," she snapped. "And I'll thank you not to refer to those books again. Everyone thinks we're cute now, and we've lost a lot of the respect we used to be accorded."

"Some would say that any publicity is good publicity," Dahlia said, curious about this unexpected sign of temper. No one had snapped at Dahlia in, oh, five decades. She'd caught an unexpected glimpse of the darker thing that lived inside the untidy young creature sitting across the table.

"If one more person asks me where my owl is, or how to get to Gringotts, I'll turn them into a..."

"Pig?" Dahlia suggested.

The Circe glared at her. "That was my ancestor's thing, not mine," she

said.

Interesting. “Let’s start again, from the beginning,” Dahlia said. “Please don’t call me Mrs. Swiftfoot. Swiftfoot was my husband’s pack name. I’ve broken my connection with his pack.”

Clifford, setting the witch’s glass of water before her and supplying both of them with menus (though Dahlia didn’t need one, of course), winked at Dahlia with his face carefully turned away from the Circe.

The Circe took several deep breaths in a visible effort to calm herself. “What shall I call you?” She smiled at her hostess, tossed the red hair again.

“You may call me Dahlia,” the vampire said. “Do you have a human name?”

“Yes. Kathy Aenidis.”

“Kathy?” Dahlia might have been saying “dead mouse.”

“Yes,” the young woman said defiantly. “I had to have one name that was easy to spell.”

Dahlia raised her black brows. She’d never in her life done anything because it would be easy for humans. She’d changed her own original name, which was hardly pronounceable by modern tongues, to keep some protective coloration. That had been eighty years ago. “And you make your living by the practice of sorcery?” Dahlia asked in a gentle voice.

“Actually, a girl can’t make a living at full-time sorcery anymore,” Kathy said with a brave smile. “Not with so many of the supernaturals trying to do things the official, human way. The only sorcerer who’s gone public is in Chicago, and I hear he’s struggling. I’m a schoolteacher.”

“You teach human children.” There was no expression at all in Dahlia’s voice.

Kathy nodded happily. “Oh, yes, third grade. They’re so cute! It’s an ideal age, I think, because they’re all well past being potty-trained and they know their basic socialization skills; standing in line, waiting their turn to speak, sharing...”

“Potty-trained,” Dahlia said, turning even whiter, if that were possible. Dahlia reflected that she herself had never learned any socialization skills, if Kathy Aenidis’s list was complete.

The witch babbled on, while Dahlia considered the possibility that she’d made a huge mistake. Could her information be at fault? This woman was a blathering fool. Dahlia was tempted to get up and walk out,

leaving the witch sitting at the table. But her sheriff, Cedric, and her one remaining friend in her husband's pack, Clifford, had worked hard to make this appointment for Dahlia, and she decided she should at least see this meeting through to the next step.

"But here I am, chattering away," Kathy said, just when Dahlia was thinking she might lean across the table and break Kathy's arm. The witch beamed at Dahlia. "You asked me here because you thought I might be able to do something for you. Can I ask in what way? The original Circe, the founder of the line, never got to meet a vampire, though I'm assuming there were vampires back then. I'm so excited to meet you, and I hope I can help you. And of course I can always use extra money!"

Dahlia was relieved to be getting to the point. It had been a long time since she'd dealt with a breather (however different a human a witch might be) with herself cast in the role of supplicant, and it wasn't easy. "I am a widow."

"Really?" Kathy looked startled.

Dahlia began to suspect Kathy was a better actress than she appeared. "Can you not see I am wearing black? Total, unrelieved black?"

"Yes, but... don't vampires like to wear black anyway? And it's very low-cut," Kathy said.

Dahlia's eyes flashed red for a second. "Do you expect me to look like a frump because my husband died?" Her voice was so cold, there were icicles hanging from every word.

"No," Kathy said hastily. "Oh, no, of course not. Black is always appropriate." She appeared to fumble around for a change of topic. "Excuse me for asking, but what happened to Mr. Swiftfoot?"

"He was murdered," Dahlia said with no expression at all.

"Oh, my Gods! I'm so sorry! Did you want to contact his spirit? Because I don't do that kind of work, but I do know a very good medium. She's the real deal. If she can't connect with him, no one can." Kathy's eyes blinked earnestly behind the lenses of her glasses.

Dahlia worked hard to suppress her instant reaction, which was to spit on Kathy. Or spit her. Either one would relieve her anger. Since Todd's death, she'd had a hard time keeping control of her emotions. Temper control had never been her best thing, anyway. But now was not the time to break discipline. She had a goal, a plan.

“No, I don’t want to contact Todd,” Dahlia said, her voice very hushed and smooth. “What would be the point of that? He can’t come back. I went to the trouble of finding you because I want to punish those who killed him.”

“Ah.” Kathy sat back in her chair and smiled. And though nothing obvious about her had changed, she looked quite different from the messy, bumbling schoolteacher who’d followed the headwaiter to the table. Suddenly, Dahlia was convinced she was on the right track. Cedric and Clifford had been right. This Circe was the right witch. “Now, that’s much more doable,” Kathy continued. “What did you have in mind?”

“I want them all dead. That’s what I have in mind.”

“Oh, dear.”

Clifford popped out of nowhere to take Kathy’s order and to bring Dahlia another wineglass full of TrueBlood. Dahlia stared at it resentfully. It looked real, it tasted real—but there was no substitute for blood straight from the source. Nights like this, she just wanted to grab someone and chomp. Her fangs ran out at the thought.

“Would you tell me how his death came about?” Kathy asked very respectfully.

Dahlia had to wait for a moment to get her fangs under control. She looked at the witch with great attention, but now Kathy didn’t seem to be uneasy at all. “Here in Rhodes,” Dahlia said, “there are two main werewolf packs, as you may know. The Swiftfoot pack is fairly large, thirty or forty strong, and its members live mostly in the humbler neighborhoods of the older part of the city. Swiftfoot pack members tend to be manual laborers or low-level professionals: motorcyclists, cops, city workers of all kinds. My husband Todd was a Swiftfoot, of course. We have... had been married a year.”

Though the legislation was being debated in the House, it was not yet legal for vampires to marry humans, and since werewolves had not yet revealed themselves to the populace at large the way the vamps had, they were counted as human. Dahlia and Todd’s marriage hadn’t been legal any more than Don’s and Taffy’s, but Dahlia didn’t care for human law.

“I understand,” Kathy murmured.

Dahlia was skeptical about that, but she continued, “The other pack is the Ripper pack from the western suburbs. The Ripper pack is growing

in numbers. It's composed mostly of professionals—dentists, nurses, architects. Psychologists. Schoolteachers,” Dahlia added, her upper lip curling in a snarl that would have done credit to any Were.

“I understand,” Kathy said again. “Different social strata, but they're all the same animal under the skin, right?” She spread her hands in an all-inclusive gesture.

Dahlia could see the telltale signs of someone who'd taken counseling courses: the wise nod, the intent eye focus, the effort to draw the talk out more. Dahlia shuddered, very delicately. But she needed this woman, and she laced her fingers together so her little fists wouldn't bury themselves in the witch's abdomen. Dahlia waited while Clifford placed Kathy's salad in front of her. Behind the witch's back, he gave her a questioning look, and she nodded. After making sure Kathy had everything she needed, he wheeled off to the kitchen to make a phone call.

“The Rippers opposed two of the Swiftfoot pack marrying vampires,” Dahlia said. “They feared such marriages would pull them into the spotlight before they were ready to be seen.” Her mouth folded in a tight line. “Quite disregarding the fact that the wolves have been considering that very course of action. They'd been talking it to death, months before I'd even met Todd.”

“So you feel partially responsible for what happened to your husband,” Kathy said, stabbing into her salad with her fork, her voice as full of sympathy as a beehive is of honey. Yep, counseling courses.

“On the contrary,” Dahlia said in a truly chilling voice. “I blame the Rippers entirely and completely, and I want their heads on a platter.”

Kathy jumped, but then she concentrated on her plate for a few minutes to give Dahlia some composure time. Kathy was exhibiting a bit more intelligence than Dahlia had given her credit for possessing. “How many Rippers do you estimate there are?” Kathy asked when a glance informed her that Dahlia was no longer rigid with fury.

“That would be over fifty. My friend Taffy has counted them when the Ripper and Swiftfoot packs hold their rare joint pack meetings. She's a vampire, like me. She's very good at evading attention. Taffy's married to Don Swiftfoot, the packleader.”

“What is the attitude of the Swiftfoot pack to Todd's death?”

“According to their standards, it was a legal death.”

“Legal?”

“Yes, so they decided. Werewolves,” Dahlia said in a tone of deepest disgust. She’d lost her self-control, but closed her eyes, took a moment, regained her hold on herself. She’d known this would be a delicate interview; she hadn’t realized quite how difficult she’d find it. “My husband was the best of them, and they will not avenge his death. But I will. Will you help me?” Her glowing eyes skewered the witch across the table—this witch who taught little children, this Circe whose ancestor had turned visitors to her island home into pigs because she’d damn well felt like it.

“The figure we discussed over the phone...”

“Stands,” Dahlia said, nodding solemnly, sure now she’d been talking to the right person.

“I’ll consider it. It sounds risky,” Kathy said. “My many-times great-grandmother was all about vengeance, especially against men. I’m partial to men when they’re only as tall as my waist and have trouble tying their shoes.” She laughed, and took off her glasses to polish them on her napkin. “Then, I figure I have a chance to set them straight. By the time they’re grown up, it’s too late.”

That was the Circe’s party line, Dahlia could tell by the ease with which Kathy spouted the words. Dahlia had been a very successful predator for more years than she could count, and a successful predator knows her prey. She thought Kathy wasn’t exactly being honest. She thought Kathy liked men very much. “So it’s true about the pigs?” Dahlia asked.

“Yes, absolutely.” Kathy smiled proudly. “The original Circe fed Odysseus’s men drugs, which made them hallucinate they were pigs, but since then we’ve learned how to do it better.”

Clifford removed the salad plate and told Kathy that her steak would be ready in just a moment. Kathy waved a hand at him rather than looking at Clifford directly.

“Was Odysseus really so good in bed?” Dahlia asked. She’d heard it personally from a vampire who’d lived on a neighboring island, but it was always interesting to hear stories from an inside source. “Circe kept him for a year... the legend says.” Actually, “the legend” was Dahlia’s buddy Thalia, who was even older than Dahlia. Thalia, during her nighttime hunting, had come across Odysseus a time or two.

“Not only entertaining, but...” Kathy held her hands apart about nine

inches, glanced at Dahlia to make sure she'd registered the gesture, then made an incomplete circle with her thumb and pointer finger to indicate girth. Dahlia's eyes widened. She was genuinely impressed. "And he knew how to use it," the witch said. "That's what she said in her spellbook."

Clifford placed the steak and baked potato in front of the Circe as if they had been ambrosia made by the gods. From the price on the menu, they might as well have been. He inquired discreetly if Kathy needed anything else, and upon hearing she was fine, he left.

"You say the original Circe left a record." Dahlia looked approving. "The grimoire you spoke of. Is that the same thing as a spellbook?"

"Yes, it is. And it's also a record of a witch's life and deeds. All hereditary witch lines keep one, though of course, ours is several books now," Kathy said proudly. "If you don't mind me changing the subject, and maybe getting into something painful, how did your husband's death come about?"

Dahlia wanted to end the meeting right there, on the spot, at that moment. But she had to show the woman she trusted her. Dahlia braced herself and said, "Todd was second in command of the Swiftfoot pack. Whoever wanted to become packmaster had to go through Todd first. Of course, you wouldn't know this, but the Swiftfoot pack hangs out at the Full Moon Bar."

Kathy, who was chewing steadily, nodded to show she'd absorbed that information.

"A wolf from the Ripper pack came to the Full Moon one night when Todd and Don were both there. There was no open enmity between the two packs up until then, so this wasn't so very unusual. According to a friend of mine, Todd was surprised when the Were challenged Todd after they'd had a couple of beers together. I believe that the wolf put something in Todd's beer."

Kathy lay down her fork and stared over at Dahlia. She looked horrified.

"Todd fought, but Don said he staggered a couple of times and seemed to have trouble focusing. Eventually, it became clear that Todd couldn't win. But he wouldn't concede. Don told Taffy that Todd didn't even seem to know where he was. And after a time, the Ripper dealt the killing blow."

"Don couldn't stop it?"

Dahlia looked down at her hands to keep her face private. "He kept urging Todd to say the right words of surrender, and Todd wouldn't or

couldn't. Since he didn't speak, Bart Ripper was technically within his rights to kill him."

Kathy looked rather ill. "I'm so sorry. I'm gathering that you weren't there?" she said, her voice faltering.

"No. I didn't like to spend evenings at the Full Moon. I'm not very popular with most of the pack." Dahlia shrugged with supreme indifference.

"Was your friend Taffy there?"

"No, though Taffy is far more popular with the Weres than I." Dahlia's lack of worry about this was apparent. "But she's very concerned. Now her husband has a Ripper second, who'll certainly challenge him at the next full moon in two nights, or the one after that. Who knows what tricks Bart has in store?"

Kathy seemed to relax a bit. "Okay, I got the picture now," she said with a reassuring half smile. "Have you figured out a way to do this, and what you want done?"

"Yes, I have," Dahlia said. "Are you willing?"

"I'm enthusiastic about trying," Kathy said, though she didn't sound enthusiastic. "But, of course... I'm doing this as a professional. When we agreed on a price, I didn't realize there would be up to fifty people to take care of; and let me tell you, schoolteachers are always short of money..."

So for the next five minutes, they revisited the topic of price.

Dahlia's friend Taffy was waiting at the vampire nest. In the city of Rhodes, the largest vampire nest was owned by the sheriff, or local vampire leader, a rather lazy and indolent vamp named Cedric, who had excellent connections. Dahlia and Taffy had both lived in the nest before their marriages, and Dahlia had returned to live in her former room after Todd's death.

At this hour of the night, the rest of the resident vampires were out amusing themselves. The big mansion seemed pleasantly empty.

"What was the Circe like?" Taffy asked. Her blond hair was piled up high on her head, and she wore the slut clothes Don favored—leather pants that fit like a glove, and a red halter top studded with silver circles. Her earrings were ancient Sumerian, though, and Dahlia smiled when she noticed them. Taffy hadn't totally gone over to the dark side.

Dahlia described her meeting with Kathy Aenidis... in detail. "We need

to find out if she's really as good as she says she is," Dahlia said. "No matter how many stories Cedric has heard about her, there's nothing like firsthand evidence. So we'll need to ask a breather. I think Clifford wouldn't mind doing some more research for us."

Taffy swatted her friend on the shoulder. "Dahlia, you know that's just rude! Can't you say 'human'? Clifford's already brought us the tape from the bar. No one's seen it but us."

"Clifford seems pleased to help. He was very fond of Todd," Dahlia said. "I think he actually enjoyed an evening at his old job. He said he was making sure the Circe didn't poison me at the restaurant. I don't think she ever realized that I knew more than I told her."

"If it hadn't been for the tape, we would never have known what happened."

"My Todd was poisoned. And I believe Kathy Aenidis prepared that poison. My research shows she's probably the only witch in Rhodes with the knowledge to make a potion that would cause Todd to do what Don described."

"The tape clearly shows Bart putting something into Todd's beer," Taffy said.

"I think we know the truth now," Dahlia said. Her pretty face was hard and unyielding as a rock. "But we need to ask Clifford to visit us. I want to be absolutely sure she's the one we need. Cedric did some wonderful research, and to my mind she gave herself away, but I have to be certain she understood what she was doing." The two vampires looked at each other. Though outwardly so different, they'd shared a nest for years, and they understood each other very well.

Clifford was there within the hour. Though visibly uneasy at being in a vampire nest, he did his best to be jaunty and nonchalant. Dahlia thought he might be more relaxed in her own small room on the bedroom floor, and the young Were did seem to find Dahlia's personal domain more homey.

Clifford had been an invaluable accomplice, and Dahlia was already worried about how she could reward him for his service. Though he said he was helping because he'd been devoted to the older Todd, Dahlia knew very well that Clifford also found Todd's widow intriguing and attractive.

He'd come to Dahlia after Todd's death when he'd reviewed the security tapes of the events at Full Moon Bar the night Todd died. Clifford, who

was in training to become pack shaman, was in charge of all the security tapes at all the Swiftfoot businesses in Rhodes, and he attended film classes at Rhodes University whenever he could fit them in to his shaman training schedule. Like most of the Swiftfoot males, he was tall and had light brown hair. Though he hadn't grown into his full strength, he was formidable enough to humans.

"Dahlia," he said, and bent to kiss her on the cheek.

Dahlia hugged him, taking care to be gentle. It was so easy to break their bones.

Clifford was blissfully unaware of her restraint. He turned from Dahlia to Taffy. "Wife of my packmaster," he saluted her formally. He bowed his head, and Taffy sniffed his neck, as she was supposed to do. She rolled her eyes at Dahlia while Clifford couldn't see her. Then Taffy gave the young Were a little lick, and he straightened. "What do you beautiful ladies want me to do for you?" He spoke to both of them, but his gaze was on Dahlia.

"We need you to film a third-grade classroom," Taffy said.

"We need to know if there's anything suspicious, or simply different, about the way the teacher treats the children. The teacher will be the young woman you saw tonight in the restaurant. Just in case, we need some leverage."

Clifford flinched. "You think she's, like, abusing the kids or something?"

"Oh, probably not," Dahlia said. Clifford didn't seem reassured. "Let me warn you, Clifford, you must have a story to tell, and it has to be a good one, a credible one. This woman is a witch and she can do awful things to men, if her predecessor is any example to go by."

Clifford brightened. "Hey, I'm a shaman and a Were," he said proudly. "If she's a woman—and I know that she is—I can charm her out of her pants."

The two vampires raised their brows, clearly skeptical.

"Well, maybe it wouldn't work on you ladies," Clifford conceded. "But a witch? Piece o' cake."

The two vampires exchanged glances. It was true that many young Weres possessed a lot of physical charm. And if their suspicions were correct, the witch had already proved susceptible to that particular brand of charm. They looked at Clifford, and they nodded simultaneously.

The next night, Clifford rang the mansion doorbell just after the sun

had gone down. Taffy, who'd been waiting anxiously since the second she'd risen, gaped up at the young man. He now had grayish-white horns sprouting from his forehead. They were about half the size of a longhorn bull's, and they were sharp-pointed. Dahlia, who'd heard Clifford's voice and come to greet him, put her hand over her mouth.

"Piece of cake," Taffy said. She turned away because she was trying not to laugh. Even Dahlia's lips curved in a quick smile. She preceded Taffy and the Were down the hall to her room. "Please sit down, Clifford," she said, trying to make her voice as level as ever. "You seem to have acquired a burden." They passed a yawning male vamp on their way, and his mouth fell open when he took in Clifford's new head decorations.

The young Were was trying hard not to look as chagrined as he must have felt. "Well, okay, stuff happened. I filmed in several classrooms," Clifford began, but had to stop and rearrange himself in the chair. The unaccustomed weight of the horns put him off balance unless he sat absolutely straight. "So that part was okay. The school seemed happy that the university film class was making a short feature about children. But after I filmed Kathy's kids, I hung around while they were on the playground, trying to make a pass at her. I got her address and phone number, so she went along with it, up to a point. But when she realized I was a Were, and she figured out I knew what she was, she felt free to show her real nature. I pushed a little too hard with the sexual innuendo, maybe." Clifford shrugged, and his horns wobbled. He had to reach up to grab his head to make it balance. "She twiddled around with her fingers and said a few words in some language I didn't know. I felt okay at first, but by the time I got home, the horns had started growing."

The two vampires stared at the young Were without saying a word. Then they burst into laughter, and he glared at them while they rocked back and forth.

"Well, we know she's the real deal now," Taffy said to Dahlia.

"Yes. Let's watch Clifford's film."

"You'll find it interesting," Clifford said, though he wouldn't elaborate. Payback for the laughter, of course. He passed Dahlia a disc.

Dahlia had a television and a DVD player in her room, and it was the work of a second to start Clifford's morning project. In a moment they were watching Kathy Aenidis's third-grade class. The children all looked

well scrubbed and neat, which was a surprise to Dahlia, who had kept up with the progress of modern education through the newer vampires.

Taffy said, "They look so tidy."

"Yeah, the kids in her room did look better than the kids in the adjoining rooms," Clifford agreed. "Shoelaces tied, clothes clean, shirts tucked in. But you'll understand why in a minute."

Kathy Aenidis, also known as the Circe, passed through the rows of desk doing her teacher thing. Her red hair was coming out of its low ponytail, and her glasses were sliding down her nose. Her long skirt came down almost to the socks and Birkenstocks on her feet.

Dahlia shuddered, and Taffy said, "Ewwww."

While the camera followed the young teacher around her classroom, Kathy patted, corrected, encouraged, and chided. But all the while, her fingers were moving unobtrusively by her side.

"I see," said Dahlia.

"See what? Aha!" said Taffy a moment later. "There, you see? She's spelling them as she goes."

"Their test scores are significantly higher," Clifford said as his hands shot up yet again to still his wobbling head. "The principal told me so. The whole staff thinks Miss Kathy is the greatest thing since sliced bread."

"She's definitely got another side," Dahlia murmured, her eyes fixed on the image of the plump and sweet Circe, whose fingers flickered constantly as she taught the children arithmetic. "I'll give her this. The teaching job is good cover. Who would believe a word anyone spoke against her?"

"Oh, we would," Taffy said. Taffy took things literally.

"I sure as hell would," Clifford said. "Ladies, what am I gonna do about these horns? If I go to my instructor, he'll laugh his ass off and make it a dinner story for years. And I haven't had enough experience to attempt anything like this myself. I might vanish my whole head. These horns are throwing my skull off balance! What do you think? Ideas, please."

"Cut them off?" Dahlia suggested.

Clifford flinched. "Don't even say that as a joke," he said.

"They actually look good on you," Dahlia said, eyeing Clifford with some appreciation. She felt better than she had since Todd's death. She'd enlisted the services of exactly the right witch, and she was going to have her vengeance. As for her glimpse into the morals of the Circe, Dahlia

wasn't overly concerned. After this job was done, she wasn't planning on having dealings with the witch again.

Taffy wasn't so distracted by dreams of the future as Dahlia. "Come on, Clifford," she said. "We'll go see the Ancient Pythoness. She'll fix you up."

"If she's in her right mind today," Dahlia said quietly while Clifford was busy pulling on his coat and opening his umbrella, the only thing that would halfway conceal his horns.

"I called the Depository," Taffy whispered back. The Depository was the vampire headquarters for Rhodes, the place where all the secret ceremonial things were kept—and anything or anyone that the vampires wanted to hide or imprison. The Ancient Pythoness, who'd been turned when she was a very old woman, was one of the artifacts who needed to be hidden, for her own good. She was still quite a seer and quite a witch, but her powers were erratic and poorly controlled. Making a magical person a vampire had been a bad idea.

"While you're there," Dahlia said, struck by a sudden thought, "ask her if she can see where the current Circe hides her grimoires."

"They really keep books? Full of spells and stuff?"

"Yes, they do. The current Circe said as much."

"Oh," Taffy said. "Well, that's very interesting. Are you thinking we could steal them and hold them for ransom? And she wouldn't be able to use the spells, because we'd have them."

Dahlia tried not to look as exasperated as she felt. "No, Taff, that's not what I was thinking. Just find out from the AP, and we'll plan from there."

Dahlia had thought of a final polish to her plan.

Taffy reported that Clifford had had a great time with the Ancient Pythoness, who was in a chipper mood and propositioned him several times. Clifford easily dodged the AP's salacious suggestions, charmed her with his health and youth and budding shaman abilities—and his horns—and in the end, obtained everything he'd been told to ask for.

He reported back the next night, happily rid of his unwanted head decorations, to tell Dahlia and Taffy that he'd located the meeting place of the Ripper pack. Dahlia wouldn't have been surprised if they'd convened in a Starbucks, but it was even worse; they met in a gym called the Fitness Firm.

Taffy made gagging sounds.

“What?” Clifford asked. It was the night before the full moon, and he was antsy and tense. “It looked like a great gym. Boy, those Rippers got some good-looking women, let me tell you!” He let out a happy yip, then looked sideways at Dahlia, embarrassed. “Hey, you’ll never believe who I saw in there with the Rippers, looking really not-so-great in yoga pants!”

“Oh,” Dahlia said, “I think I can guess.”

“Why’d you want to know where the Circe’s spellbooks are hidden?”

“Because we need one.”

“But they’re going to be protected by all kinds of magic,” Clifford said.

“Yes, it is. But the magic will be geared to live people.”

“How can you be sure?” The young Were was doubtful, and Taffy was clearly anxious.

“The original Circe never met a vampire,” Dahlia said. “Her descendant told me so. It stands to reason that the spells to safeguard the grimoires do not protect them from the dead.”

“You’re willing to risk it,” Taffy said. “And I have to thank you, sister, because I’m too frightened.” She looked ashamed. “But I know my husband is the one in danger, and whatever else you tell me to do, I’ll do it well. You’ve never let me down.”

Dahlia did not mind one bit that Taffy had failings. She herself was simply more self-sufficient and ruthless. “Was Bart there?” Dahlia asked Clifford.

“Oh, yeah. He’s our second in command, so he’s supposed to hang with us since he’s a Swiftfoot now. But no, there he was with his old pack acting large and in charge. I saw him doing imitations of our pack members. I mean, I could recognize them, he was so good. The Rippers were laughing their asses off.”

“How could you see that?” Dahlia said. “We told you not to risk getting close.”

“The gym is a big glass cube,” Clifford said reasonably. “It’s the second floor of an office building, and the Fitness Firm is a very highfalutin gym. Between nine and ten every night, it’s open only to select parties. That’s when the Rippers go—”

“Well, how very obliging of them,” Dahlia said, and Taffy began laughing.

“Do you have any idea where the Circe is now?” Taffy asked Clifford

when she'd calmed down.

"She's out with her boyfriend," Clifford said. "They're at the movies. You want I should delay them on their way home?"

"Yes, please," Dahlia said.

She left twenty minutes later, dressed head to toe in a very becoming facsimile of Kate Beckinsale's skintight outfit in *Underworld*. Dahlia could tell Clifford's mouth was watering when she strode into the darkness. It perked her up no end.

The Circe had a little house on a cul-de-sac in a bland suburb of Rhodes. As camouflage, it was perfect, and the taxes would be reasonable, too. Dahlia could appreciate the choice, which definitely looked more Kathy Aenidis, Schoolteacher, than Circe, Dread Sorceress.

Kathy's defenses were formidable, but the Ancient Pythoness had supplied Clifford with a charm, and it seemed to work for a vampire as well as it would have for a werewolf. Dahlia was still uncertain if Kathy would have thought about defending her family records from a dead creature, but at least Dahlia had managed to cross the deck to the back door without being turned into a lizard or impaled on a sliver of bamboo. Dahlia crept close to the door and listened intently. A cat was meowing inside. Whether it was sounding a warning, like some kind of feline burglar alarm, or simply talking to itself, Dahlia couldn't tell. She was not a pet person.

Just before she was about to pick the lock, Dahlia had second thoughts. Second thoughts were rare for her, and she listened to them when she had them. The door was simply too obvious, too likely to be booby-trapped. In one smooth leap, Dahlia made it up onto the roof. She moved lightly across the shingles, noting that Kathy Aenidis needed to get a roofing crew in pretty soon. To avoid the loose shingles, she lifted herself off the roof and flew to the chimney. Pulling away the screen designed to keep out birds and bugs, Dahlia peered down into the heart of the house. The flue was open, and she could see light. Ooooh, Miss Scary Witch left a night-light on. Dahlia dropped a piece of shingle down the aperture. The piece of shingle exploded in a puff of bright light.

Okay, so the chimney was protected. If the magic would explode a chimney tile, it would certainly deal with Dahlia, too. Time to regroup.

Dahlia floated down to the grass and circled the house. The backyard was fenced in, and Dahlia felt less conspicuous there, so after one circuit

she found herself sitting on a large wooden bench in the middle of the Circe's herb garden. The bench was probably also storage for garden tools; she was sitting on the lid, not a true seat, as she stared at the back wall of the house. With her excellent night vision, she watched bugs enjoying the spring garden. Bugs had short, short lives, especially if they encountered a bug zapper, like the one she saw hanging on Kathy Aenidis's deck. One flash, and they were gone.

One flash.

In a jiffy she was back up on the roof, looking down into the chimney. She had another piece of tile in her hand, and she tossed it down. Ha! No flash! The Circe's alarm didn't automatically reset. It needed to be charged up again, now that it had gone off.

Dahlia looked at the dimly lit brick and had another rare moment's misgiving. But then she squared her shoulders and plunged into the chimney, twisting her flesh and bones with a fluidity even a shapeshifter might envy. By the time she landed in the fireplace—she was grateful that the house-proud Kathy had cleaned it out after the last fire of winter—she was battered and her black leather suit was scuffed and scraped far beyond its previous pristine smartness.

Dahlia crouched in the semidarkness, listening and looking with all her senses on alert. The only thing living in the house was the cat, whose mewing had gotten quite aggravating. Dahlia emerged from the fireplace and straightened gratefully into her normal shape and size. A clock ticked, the cat kept making noise, and somewhere a faucet dripped. She waited for five minutes, and no other sound intruded.

First, silencing the cat. Dahlia found the animal caged in the basement. Dahlia had taken the precaution of bringing down the box of hard cat food she'd seen in the kitchen, and she poured some into the bowl which protruded out from the cage. The food slid into the inner portion of the bowl, and the cat began eating immediately. It had water in a bottle suspended from the side of the cage. At least the animal was temporarily quiet.

The Ancient Pythoness had told Clifford that the grimoires were "sealed in a dark place under the light spell."

"Thanks, oh wrinkled one," Dahlia said out loud, and the cat paused its eating for a moment to take a look at her. "That means absolutely nothing,"

said Dahlia, and began to search the house's dark places. There were a few in the basement-closets and the like. Upstairs, in the very flowery living room and the gleaming little dining room, no dark places after she'd looked under the couch. Dahlia was a good searcher, and very swift and sure, and it didn't take her long to go over the house in detail, including the two bedrooms and the attic, which contained only (empty) luggage.

Dahlia stood in the middle of the bedroom and pondered. She couldn't rest her soot-stained bottom on the high bed; it was covered with a flounced white spread. Dahlia was not surprised it had a matching canopy. All the bedroom furniture was painted white and gold. The bathroom was pink, with red roses stenciled around the ceiling. Dahlia hated the decor with a passion. The only illicit thing she'd found had been a wood box of sex toys pushed discreetly under the ruffled bed. She'd tapped the floors for hidden compartments, checked for pockets in the walls, thumped the stairs, and opened the suitcases. Grimoires had to be bulky. Though Kathy had a computer, she wouldn't have committed the grimoires' contents to such a hackable machine.

Admitting defeat, Dahlia prepared to wriggle up through the chimney. As she braced herself to dislocate her shoulder, she muttered, "Charon's balls! Where could the damn thing be?"

The cat began meowing down in the cellar.

Dahlia cursed in a several ancient languages and stomped down the stairs again. It was the work of a second to weaken the clasp on the cage so it would appear the cat had butted against it once too often. Then Dahlia opened the wire door and the animal leaped out.

"Come on, then," Dahlia said, and went back upstairs to the chimney piece. Before she began working her way up the narrow opening, she held out her arms and the cat leaped into them. The added burden made the upward trip even more difficult, but when Dahlia set her mind to something, she generally succeeded.

After some painful minutes, she was again in the garden, again sitting on the wooden box, this time with the cat leaning against her legs and purring. Again, she stared at the house. Dahlia was beginning to feeling a bit discouraged. There was no garden shed, no garage.

The cat stretched up to begin sharpening its claws on the hinged wooden lid. It howled. Dahlia glared down at the animal—and then she

got the message.

In a flash, Dahlia had leaped off and raised the lid, felt a shift in the atmosphere that indicated the presence of magic, and tossed out trowels and saws to find books wrapped in heavy plastic. They were bound in different ways, in different materials. But one was clearly the most ancient. Dahlia hugged it to herself for a moment of triumph. Then she reloaded the garden tools in the box. I only hope she doesn't need it tonight, Dahlia thought, and gripping the book and the cat to her body, she rose into the sky. Under the black leather of her jumpsuit, her arms were feeling curiously itchy. She wondered if there'd been bugs in the wooden box, bugs with a fondness for dead flesh. Or perhaps she was allergic to cats? She snorted. Vampires didn't have allergies.

That night Kathy's boyfriend's car had two flat tires when he and Kathy emerged from the cinema. He was burly and strapping, a dark man with enough chest hair to stuff a mattress. When he saw the tires, he cursed fluently and called AAA. Kathy took the opportunity to practice an inflation spell, but it didn't work well enough to get the car out of the parking lot and into the street.

Clifford watched from a restaurant across the busy street while the two waited for the AAA truck, which was forty minutes in arriving. When the truck pulled in, the young shaman called Dahlia, who had consented to carry a cell phone that night just for the occasion.

"They'll be out of here in thirty minutes," he said. "You through?"

"Yes, I'm out of the house and I have it with me," she said, though her voice sounded funny to Clifford. He thought he heard a cat mew in the background.

"Well, see you tomorrow," he said.

"Yes," Dahlia said, and clicked END. She couldn't concentrate on flying anymore, so she walked through the streets carrying a large and ancient book swathed in plastic and followed by a black cat. As if that weren't conspicuous enough (very dusty tiny woman carrying huge whopping book through the night), Dahlia had another problem. She was clinging to every bit of available shadow for a very good reason. Her arms were covered with vines that had erupted from her skin.

Some magic did work on dead flesh. It had been a spell of light, just as the Ancient Pythoness had predicted. Light meant growing things. A garden meant vines; vines that itched.

The rest of the night was extremely painful. After she had crept into Taffy's room and frightened Taffy in the middle of having a weepy phone conversation with Don, Dahlia had conscripted her friend for surgery duty. It took an hour and more, but finally Taffy finished shearing off the vines at skin level. Dahlia was so battered by that time that Taffy gave Dahlia a drink from her own wrist. Even Cedric, who wandered into Taffy's room in search of diversion, was surprised enough to donate some healing blood to his nest child.

Once Dahlia had quit cursing, and after the open cuts began healing, she opened the spell book and began to translate, slowly and painfully. There were advantages to being extremely old and to having friends who even more ancient.

"We'll be ready tomorrow night, right?" Taffy asked anxiously. "I don't want Bart to challenge Don. He'll use some trickery to defeat him."

"We'll take care of it," Dahlia said. "My husband is dead, but we'll save yours." Truthfully, though Dahlia loved Taffy, she didn't give a rat's ass about Don. Her goal was vengeance, just as she'd told the Circe. She was just aiming that vengeance in a different direction, and she planned on doling it out in different amounts.

Clifford was reluctant to stay with the two vampires the next night, to Dahlia's exasperated amazement. He'd kept surveillance on the Fitness Factory off and on since his shaman class let out earlier in the afternoon, and when full dark fell, he'd rendezvoused with Dahlia and Taffy.

They'd already performed one errand together, the three of them, and Dahlia was carrying a big sack over her shoulder. It snorted, from time to time, in a sleepy way.

But when they hurried back toward the gym, Dahlia heard Clifford whimper as he looked up at the sky. It was the moon night. From the corner of her eye, she caught him almost twitching with anxiety to be away, to have his run with the rest of the Swiftfoot pack, even though its new second in command would have to be included with the pack tonight.

Dahlia remembered Todd's erratic behavior on moon nights, and she

felt some sympathy for her partner in crime. But Dahlia figured magic might need to be cast by a live person; she was worried that her essential deadness would pervert the effects of the spells. Clifford, though he hadn't completed his training, was as close to a witch as she could get on short notice, so she ruthlessly exerted her charm, along with a little bullying, to ensure his help for just a little longer. She had a three-pronged plan that would punish all the wrongdoers with the correct degree of severity. Once she had made sure that earlier that afternoon Clifford had told Don exactly how Bart had been able to defeat Todd, she and Taffy herded the young Were along with them.

"You'll get to go run, very soon," Taffy reassured him. "We just need one more little thing, and then you're off to join the others."

The Rippers had been gathering since the evening began, most of them stopping at the Fitness Firm when they got off work. Clifford told Dahlia and Taffy, "I think they're going to change in their gym. Then they can just slip out into the park when it gets dark enough." A large city park was less than a block away.

The Rippers had thought their procedure through, but tonight, Dahlia had developed other plans for the pack.

When the three decided the pack had completely assembled, they waited ten more minutes to be sure. Then Dahlia and Taffy drew specific patterns in chalk all the way around the building. They had studied the pattern and they were steady and swift, but it was still quite a job. When they finished, Dahlia glanced at Clifford's watch, which conveniently lit up. "They'll be changing any minute," she said. "We have to proceed."

"Did you check to see no one else was in the building?" Clifford asked in a whisper.

Dahlia looked a bit surprised. "No," she said. She shrugged. "Whoever's there must take his chances along with the Rippers."

Clifford huffed a little over this, but Dahlia fixed him with her glowing green eyes and he subsided. Dahlia could tell the young Were was not so enchanted with her as he had been; he undoubtedly thought he understood a little better now why his elders in the pack avoided the undead.

But Clifford had promised he'd help tonight, and he would complete his task. Unless Dahlia's observational skills were faulty, and she didn't think they were, the young Were was also a little excited by the prospect of

the special hunt later on.

The three stood across the street in a recessed doorway, watching the Ripper pack in their very own gym. Suddenly, the lights in the gym went out. Clifford almost howled. He knew the Weres inside were changing into their other forms, and he longed to change, too.

“Just a few more minutes, young Were,” Dahlia said, gripping his arm with a force that recalled Clifford to his duties.

“Now’s the time to use the grimoire.” Clifford had been studying it most of the day. The words he had to repeat seemed to hurt his throat when he spoke them, but Clifford persevered. When the last word had clicked the spell into place, he heard a dismal howl float through the air. It was faint because it issued from the glass-walled second story of the building across from them. A chorus of other howls followed in its wake.

Dahlia and Taffy smiled at each other.

Taffy, and then Dahlia, embraced Clifford.

“Thank you, friend,” Taffy said. “We owe you.”

Dahlia gave him a cold kiss on the cheek, having to stretch up on her toes to deliver it. “I won’t forget what you’ve done for Todd these past few days. Now, go enjoy your moon time.”

Clifford didn’t need telling twice. In a flash, he was bounding down the street to find his pack, who ran out by the reservoir. He could hardly wait. The Swiftfoot pack was going to have a special hunt tonight, though the chosen prey didn’t know it yet. He’d be told soon enough.

The pack would give Bart a head start, because that was only sporting. The packmembers had been democratic about it; they’d voted on whether or not to accept a cheater as their second in command. Unfortunately for Bart, who hadn’t been invited to the pre-change meeting, the vote against him had been unanimous.

The public door into the building lobby was still open, and Dahlia and Taffy entered as silently as snowflakes. They took the stairs up to the gym, just in case any Weres were trying to slink down. They found one confused female, and they herded her back into the large open room to join the others.

“We need more light,” Taffy said, and found the switch. She could see wonderfully well without any help. The moon’s radiance was flowing

through all the glass walls. But she wanted to view the whole picture, and then she wanted to take a few. She'd brought her Nokia camera along.

They were all hairless, all the wolves. They were embarrassed and horrified and naked and bare, because they retained just enough of their human selves to understand their condition. Taffy laughed until she felt sick, and even Dahlia had a broad smile.

A few of the large wolves growled at the two vampires, but most of them seemed to be completely demoralized by their own state. They whined and paced while Taffy took pictures.

"What do you think this is?" Dahlia said conversationally, holding the big sack out. She supported it without effort, though she was a very small woman and the sack was very full and heavy.

The yellow wolf eyes focused on the bag and the sensitive wolf noses sniffed the air. All the wolves rose to their feet. Just then, whatever was inside woke up, and gave a big questioning snuffle. Then there was a terrified oink as the creature smelled the wolves.

The Ripper pack began to growl in anticipation.

Taffy turned off the light, just in case someone walked by in the street below. "Ah, yes, you know that smell," she said coaxingly. "You may be hairless, but you're still wolves."

"This is your lucky night," Dahlia said, turning over the sack and dumping a very fat sow onto the gym floor.

In a squeal that sounded very like Kathy Aenidis's voice, the pig tried to tell the Rippers that she was a valued friend of the pack, that she was beloved girlfriend to their packmember Bart. If she could have spoken, she would have reminded the wolves of all the spells she'd cast for them, all the potions she'd brewed—including one that had caused Todd Swiftfoot to become confused and weak and dead.

But tonight the Rippers were wolves, and they'd been humiliated enough to make them on edge and impatient, and they were hungry.

"I've brought you something," Dahlia said. "Look! Bacon!"