Blood Bound

Patricia Briggs

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Like most people who own their own businesses, I work long hours that start early in the morning. So when someone calls me in the middle of the night, they'd better be dying.

'Hello, Mercy,' said Stefan's amiable voice in my ear. 'I wonder if you could do me a favor.'

Stefan had done his dying a long time ago, so I saw no reason to be nice. 'I answered the phone at' – I peered blearily at the red numbers on my bedside clock – '*three* o'clock in the morning.'

Okay, that's not exactly what I said. I may have added a few of those words a mechanic picks up to use at recalcitrant bolts and alternators that land on her toes.

'I *suppose* you could go for a second favor,' I continued, 'but I'd prefer you hang up and call me back at a more civilized hour.'

He laughed. Maybe he thought I was trying to be funny. 'I have a job to do, and I believe your particular talents would be a great asset in assuring the success of the venture.'

Old creatures, at least in my experience, like to be a little vague when they're asking you to do something. I'm a businesswoman, and I believe in getting to the specifics as quickly as possible.

'At three in the morning you need a mechanic?'

'I'm a vampire, Mercedes,' he said gently. 'Three in the morning is still prime time. But I don't need a mechanic, I need you. You owe me a favor.'

He was right, darn him. He'd helped me when the local

Alpha werewolf's daughter was kidnapped. He had warned me that he'd be collecting in return.

I yawned and sat up, giving up all hope of going back to sleep. 'All right. What am I doing for you?'

'I'm supposed to be delivering a message to a vampire who is here without my mistress's permission,' he said, getting to the point. 'I need a witness he won't notice.'

He hung up without getting an answer, or even telling me when he was coming to pick me up. It would serve him right if I just went back to sleep.

Muttering to myself, I threw on clothing: jeans, yesterday's T-shirt complete with mustard stain, and two socks with only one hole between them. Once I was more or less dressed, I shuffled off to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of cranberry juice.

It was a full moon, and my roommate, the werewolf, was out running with the local pack, so I didn't have to explain to him why I was going out with Stefan. Which was just as well.

Samuel wasn't a bad roommate as such things go, but he had a tendency to get possessive and dictatorial. Not that I let him get away with it, but arguing with werewolves requires a certain subtlety I was lacking at – I checked my wristwatch – 3:15 in the morning.

For all that I was raised by them, I'm not a werewolf, not a were-anything. I'm not a servant of the moon's phases, and in the coyote shape that is my second form. I look like any other *canis latrans*: I have the buckshot scars on my backside to prove it.

Werewolves cannot be mistaken for wolves: weres are much bigger than their non-preternatural counterparts – and a lot scarier.

What I am is a walker, though I'm sure there once was another name for it – an Indian name lost when the Europeans

devoured the New World. Maybe my father could have told me what it was if he hadn't died in a car wreck before he knew my mother was pregnant. So all I know is what the werewolves could tell me, which wasn't much.

The 'walker' comes from the Skinwalkers of the Southwest Indian tribes, but I have less in common with a Skinwalker, at least from what I've read, than I do with the werewolves. I don't do magic, I don't need a coyote skin to change shape – and I'm not evil.

I sipped my juice and looked out of the kitchen window. I couldn't see the moon herself, just her silver light that touched the nighttime landscape. Thoughts of evil seemed somehow appropriate while I waited for the vampire to come for me. If nothing else, it would keep me from falling asleep: fear has that effect on me. I'm afraid of evil.

In our modern world, even the word seems . . . old fashioned. When it comes out of hiding briefly in a Charles Manson or a Jeffrey Dahmer, we try to explain it away with drug abuse, an unhappy childhood, or mental illness.

Americans in particular are oddly innocent in their faith that science holds explanations for everything. When the werewolves finally admitted what they were to the public several months ago, the scientists immediately started looking for a virus or bacteria that could cause the Change – magic being something their laboratories and computers can't explain. Last I'd heard Johns Hopkins had a whole team devoted to the issue. Doubtless they'd find something, too, but I'm betting they'll never be able to explain how a 180-pound man turns into a 250-pound werewolf. Science doesn't allow for magic any more than it allows for evil.

The devout belief that the world is explainable is both a terrible vulnerability and a stout shield. Evil prefers it when people don't believe. Vampires, as a not-random example, seldom go out and kill people in the street. When they go

hunting, they find someone who won't be missed and bring them home where they are tended and kept comfortable – like a cow in a feedlot.

Under the rule of science, there are no witch burnings allowed, no water trials or public lynchings. In return, the average law-abiding, solid, citizen has little to worry about from the things that go bump in the night. Sometimes I wish I were an average citizen.

Average citizens don't get visited by vampires.

Nor do they worry about a pack of werewolves – at least not quite the same way as I was.

Coming out in public was a bold step for the werewolves; one that could easily backfire. Staring out at the moonlit night, I fretted about what would happen if people began to be afraid again. Werewolves aren't evil, but they aren't exactly the peaceful, law-abiding heroes that they're trying to represent themselves as either.

Someone tapped on my front door.

Vampires *are* evil. I knew that – but Stefan was more than just a vampire. Sometimes I was pretty sure he was my friend. So I wasn't really afraid until I opened the door and saw what waited on my porch.

The vampire's dark hair was slicked back, leaving his skin very pale in the moon's light. Dressed in black from head to heels, he ought to have looked like a refugee from a bad Dracula movie, but somehow the whole outfit, from black leather duster to silk gloves, looked more authentic on Stefan than his usual bright-colored T-shirt and grubby jeans. As if he'd removed a costume, rather than put one on.

He looked like someone who could kill as easily as I could change a tire, with as little thought or remorse.

Then his mobile brows climbed his forehead – and he was suddenly the same vampire who'd painted his old VW bus to look like Scooby's Mystery Machine.

'You don't look happy to see me,' he said with a quick grin that didn't show his fangs. In the dark, his eyes looked more black than brown – but then so did mine.

'Come in.' I backed away from the door so he could; then, because he'd scared me I added snappishly, 'If you want welcoming, try stopping by at a decent hour.'

He hesitated on the threshold, smiled at me, and said, 'By your invitation.' Then he stepped inside my house.

'That threshold thing really works?' I asked.

His smile widened again, this time I saw a glint of white. 'Not after you've invited me in.'

He walked past me and into the living room and then turned like a model on a runway. The folds of his duster spread out with his turn in an effect nearly cape-like.

'So how do you like me *a la Nosferatu*?'

I sighed and admitted it. 'Scared me. I thought you eschewed all things gothic.' I'd seldom seen him in anything other than jeans and T-shirts.

His smile widened even more. 'Usually I do. But the Dracula look does have its place. Oddly enough, used sparingly, it scares other vampires almost as well as it does the odd coyote-girl. Don't worry, I have a bit of costuming for you, too.'

He reached under his coat and pulled out a silver-studded leather harness.

I stared at it a moment. 'Going to an S&M strip club are you? I didn't realize there was anything like that around here.' There wasn't, not to my knowledge. Eastern Washington is more prudish than Seattle or Portland.

He laughed. 'Not tonight, sweetheart. This is for your other self.' He shook the straps out so I could see that it was a dog harness.

I took it from him. It was good leather, soft and flexible with so much silver that it looked like jewelry. If I'd been

strictly human, no doubt I'd have been taken aback at wearing such a thing. But when you spend a good part of your time running around as a coyote, collars and the like are pretty useful.

The Marrok, the leader of the North American werewolves, insists that all of the wolves wear a collar when they run in the cities, with tags that identify them as someone's pet. He also insists the names on the tags be something innocuous like Fred or Spot, no Killers or Fangs. It's safer that way – both for the werewolves and the law-enforcement people who might encounter them. Needless to say, it's as popular with the werewolves as the helmet law was with the motorcyclists when it first went into effect. Not that any of them would dream of disobeying the Marrok.

Not being a werewolf, I'm exempt from the Marrok's rules. On the other hand, I don't like running unnecessary risks either. I had a collar in my kitchen junk drawer – but it wasn't made of nifty black leather.

'So I'm part of your costume?' I asked.

'Let's just say that I think this vampire might need more intimidation than most,' he answered lightly, though something in his eyes made me think there was something more going on.

Medea wandered out from wherever she'd been sleeping. Probably Samuel's bed. Purring furiously, she wound her small self around Stefan's left leg and then rubbed her face against his boot to mark him as hers.

'Cats and ghosts don't like vampires,' Stefan said staring down at her.

'Medea likes anything that might feed or pet her,' I told him. 'She's not picky.'

He bent down and scooped her up. Being picked up isn't Medea's favorite thing, so she yowled at him several times

before going back to purring as she sank her claws into his expensive leather sleeve.

'You aren't cashing in your favor just to appear more intimidating,' I said, looking up from the soft leather harness to meet his eyes. Unwise with vampires, he himself had told me so, but all I saw was opaque darkness. 'You said you wanted a witness. A witness to what?'

'No, I don't need you in order to appear intimidating,' Stefan agreed softly after I'd stared at him for a few seconds. 'But *he'll* think intimidation is why I have a coyote on my leash.' He hesitated, and then shrugged. 'This vampire has been through here before, and I think that he managed to deceive one of our young ones. Because of what you are, you are immune to many vampiric powers, especially if the vampire in question doesn't know what you are. Thinking you a coyote, he's probably not going to waste his magic on you at all. It is unlikely, but he might manage to deceive me as well as he did Daniel. I don't think he'll be able to deceive you.'

I'd just learned that little tidbit about being resistant to vampiric magic. It wasn't particularly useful for me since a vampire is strong enough to break my neck with the same effort I'd put into snapping a piece of celery.

'He won't hurt you,' Stefan said when I was silent for too long. 'I give you my word of honor.'

I didn't know how old Stefan was, but he used that phrase like a man who meant it. Sometimes he made it hard to remember that vampires are evil. It didn't really matter, though. I owed him.

'All right,' I said.

Looking down at the harness I thought about getting my own collar instead. I could change shape while wearing a collar – my neck wasn't any bigger around as a human than as a coyote. The harness, suitable for a thirty-pound coyote,

would be too tight for me to regain human form while I wore it. The advantage of the harness though, was that I wouldn't be attached to Stefan by my neck.

My collar was bright purple with pink flowers embroidered on it. Not very *Nosferatu*.

I handed the harness to Stefan. 'You'll have to put it on me after I change,' I told him. 'I'll be right back.'

I changed shape in my bedroom because I had to take off my clothes to do it. I'm not really all that modest, a shapeshifter gets over that pretty fast, but I try not to get naked in front of someone who might misread my casual nudity for casualness in other areas.

Although Stefan had at least three cars that I knew of, he had apparently taken a 'faster way,' as he put it, to my house, so we got in my Rabbit to travel to his meeting.

For a few minutes, I wasn't certain he was going to be able to get it started. The old diesel didn't like getting up this early in the morning any more than I did. Stefan muttered a few Italian oaths under his breath, and at last it caught and we were off.

Never ride in a car with a vampire who is in a hurry. I didn't know my Rabbit could peel out like that. We turned onto the highway with the rpms redlined; the car stayed on all four wheels, but only just.

The Rabbit actually seemed to like the drive better than I did; the engine roughness I'd been trying for years to get rid of smoothed out and it purred. I closed my eyes and hoped the wheels stayed on.

When Stefan took us over the river on the cable bridge that dropped us off in the middle of Pasco he was driving forty miles an hour over the speed limit. Not slowing noticeably, he crossed through the heart of the industrial area to a cluster of hotels that sprang up on the far edge of town

near the onramp to the highway that headed out toward Spokane and other points north. By some miracle – probably aided by the early hour – we weren't picked up for speeding.

The hotel Stefan took us to was neither the best nor the worst of them. It catered to truckers, though there was only one of the big rigs parked in the lot. Maybe Tuesday nights were slow. Stefan parked the Rabbit next to the only other car in the lot, a black BMW, despite the plethora of empty parking spaces.

I jumped out of the car's open window into the parking lot and was hit with the smell of vampire and blood. My nose is very good, especially when I'm a coyote, but like anyone else, I don't always notice what I'm smelling. Most of the time it's like trying to listen to all of the conversations in a crowded restaurant. But this was impossible to miss.

Maybe it was bad enough to drive off normal humans, and that's why the parking lot was nearly empty.

I looked at Stefan to see if he smelled it, too, but his attention was focused on the car we'd parked beside. As soon as he'd drawn my attention to it, I realized the smell was coming from the BMW. How was it that the car could smell more like a vampire than Stefan the vampire did?

I caught another, more subtle, scent that caused my lips to draw away from my teeth even though I couldn't have said what the bitter-dark odor was. As soon as it touched my nose it wrapped itself around me, clouding all the other scents until it was all I could smell.

Stefan came around the car in a rush, snatched up the leash and tugged it hard to quiet my growl. I jerked back and snapped my teeth at him. I wasn't a damn dog. He could have asked me to be quiet.

'Settle down,' he said, but he wasn't watching me. He

was looking at the hotel. I smelled something else then, a shadow of a scent soon overcome by that other smell. But even that brief whiff was enough to identify the familiar smell of fear, Stefan's fear. What could scare a vampire?

'Come,' he said turning toward the hotel and tugged me forward, out of my confusion.

Once I'd quit resisting his pull, he spoke to me in a rapid and quiet voice. 'I don't want you to do anything, Mercy, no matter what you see or hear. You aren't up to a fight with this one. I just need an impartial witness who won't get herself killed. So play coyote with all your might and if I don't make it out of here, go tell the Mistress what I asked you to do for me – and what you saw.'

How did he expect me to escape something that could kill him? He hadn't been talking like this earlier, nor had he been afraid. Maybe he could smell what I was smelling – and he knew what it was. I couldn't ask him though, because a coyote isn't equipped for human speech.

He led the way to a smoked glass door. It was locked, but there was a key-card box with a small, red-blinking, LED light. He tapped a finger on the box and the light turned green, just as if he'd swiped a magnetic card through it.

The door opened without protest and closed behind us with a final sounding click. There was nothing creepy about the hallway, but it bothered me anyway. Probably Stefan's nerves rubbing off on me. *What would scare a vampire?*

Somewhere, someone slammed a door and I jumped.

Either he knew where the vampire was staying, or his nose wasn't hampered by the scent of that otherness like mine was. He took me briskly through the long hallway and stopped about halfway down. He tapped on the door with his knuckles, though I, and so presumably Stefan, could hear that whoever awaited us inside the room had started for the door as soon as we stopped in front of it.

After all the build up, the vampire who opened the door was almost anticlimatic, like expecting to hear Pavarotti sing Wagner and getting Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd instead.

The new vampire was clean shaven and his hair was combed and pulled back into a tidy, short, ponytail. His clothes were neat and clean, though a bit wrinkled as if they'd been in a suitcase – but somehow the overall impression I got was disheveled and filthy. He was significantly shorter than Stefan and much less intimidating. First point to Stefan, which was good since he'd put so much effort into his Prince of Darkness garb.

The stranger's long-sleeved, knit shirt hung on him, as if it rested on skeleton rather than flesh. When he moved, one of his sleeves slid up, revealing an arm so emaciated that the hollow between the bones of his forearm was visible. He stood slightly hunched, as if he didn't quite have the energy to straighten up.

I'd met vampires other than Stefan before: scary vampires with glowing eyes and fangs. This one looked like an addict so far gone there was nothing left of the person he had once been, as if he might fade away at any moment, leaving only his body behind.

Stefan, though, wasn't reassured by the other's apparent frailty – if anything, his tension had increased. Not being able to smell much around that unpleasant, pervasive bitterness was bothering me more than the vampire who didn't look like much of an opponent at all.

'Word of your coming has reached my mistress,' Stefan said, his voice steady, if a little more clipped than usual. 'She is very disappointed that you did not see fit to tell her you would be visiting her territory.'

'Come in, come in,' said the other vampire, stepping back from the door to invite Stefan through. 'No need to stand out in the hallway waking up people who are trying to sleep.'

I couldn't tell if he knew Stefan was afraid or not. I've never been quite sure how well vampires can scent things – though they clearly have better noses than humans do. He didn't seem intimidated by Stefan and his black clothes, though; instead he sounded almost distracted, as if we'd interrupted something important.

The bathroom door was shut as we walked past it. I pricked my ears, but I couldn't hear anything behind the shut door. My nose was useless. Stefan took us all the way to the far side of the room, near the sliding glass doors that were all but hidden by heavy, floor-to-ceiling, curtains. The room was bare and impersonal except for the suitcase, which lay closed on top of the chest of drawers.

Stefan waited until the other vampire had shut the door before he said in a cold voice, 'There is no one trying to sleep tonight in this hotel.'

It seemed an odd remark, but the stranger seemed to know what Stefan meant because he giggled, cupping a hand coyly over his mouth in a manner that seemed more in keeping with a twelve-year-old girl than a man of any age. It was odd enough that it took me a while to assess Stefan's remark.

Surely he hadn't meant it the way it sounded. No sane vampire would have killed everyone in the hotel. Vampires were as ruthless as the werewolves in enforcing their rules about not drawing unwanted attention to themselves – and wholesale slaughter of humans would draw attention. Even if there weren't many guests, there would be employees of the hotel.

The vampire dropped his hand from his face leaving behind a face empty of amusement. It didn't make me feel any better. It was like watching Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the change was so great.

'No one to wake up?' he asked, as if he hadn't reacted in

any other way to Stefan's comment. 'You might be right. It is still poor manners to keep someone waiting at the door, isn't it? Which one of her minions are you?' He held up a hand. 'No, wait, don't tell me. Let me guess.'

While Stefan waited, all of his usual animation completely shut down, the stranger walked all the way around him, pausing just behind us. Unconstrained by anything but the leash, I turned to watch.

When he was directly behind Stefan, the other vampire bent down and scratched me behind my ears.

I usually don't mind being touched, but as soon as his fingers brushed against my fur I knew I didn't want him touching me. Involuntarily, I hunched away from his hand and into Stefan's leg. My fur kept his skin away from mine, but that didn't keep his touch from feeling filthy, unclean.

The scent of him lingered on my fur and I realized the unpleasant odor that had been clogging my nose was coming from him.

'Careful,' Stefan told him without looking around. 'She bites.'

'Animals *love* me.' The remark made my flesh crawl it was so inappropriate coming from this . . . creeping monster. He crouched on his heels and rubbed my ears again. I couldn't tell if Stefan wanted me to bite him or not. I chose not, because I didn't want the taste of him on my tongue. I could always bite him later if I wanted to.

Stefan didn't comment, nor did he look anywhere except straight in front of him. I wondered if he would have lost status points if he'd turned. Werewolves play power games, too, but I know the rules for them. A werewolf would never have allowed a strange wolf to walk behind him.

He left off petting me, stood up, and walked around until he faced Stefan again. 'So you are Stefan, Marsilia's little soldier boy. I *have* heard of you – though your reputation is

not what it once was, is it? Running away from Italy like that would soil any man's honor. Somehow, still, I expected more. All those stories . . . I expected to find a monster among monsters, a creature of nightmares who frightens even other vampires – and all I see is a dried-up has-been. I suppose that's what happens when you hide yourself in a little backwater town for a few centuries.'

There was a slight pause after the other vampire's last words.

Then Stefan laughed, and said, 'Whereas *you* have no reputation at all.' His voice was lighter than usual, sounding almost rushed, as if what he was saying was of no moment. I took a step away from him without meaning to, somehow frightened by that light, amused voice. He smiled gently at the other vampire and his tone softened further as he said, 'That's what happens when you are newly made and abandoned.'

It must have been some sort of vampire super-insult because the second vampire erupted, reacting as if Stefan's words had been an electric goad. He didn't go after Stefan, though.

Instead, he bent down and grabbed the bottom of the king-sized box spring and jerk-lifted it and everything above it over his head. He swung it toward the hall door and then around so that the ends of the box spring, mattress, and bedding were balanced for an instant.

He shifted his grip and threw them all the way through the wall and into the empty hotel room next door, landing on the floor in a cloud of Sheetrock dust. Two of the wall studs hung splintered, suspended from somewhere inside the wall, giving the hole in the wall the appearance of a jack-o-lantern's smile. The false headboard, permanently mounted into the wall where the bed had been, looked forlorn and stupid hanging a foot or more above the pedestal of the bed.

The vampire's speed and strength didn't surprise me. I'd seen a few werewolves throw temper tantrums, enough to know that if the vampire had been truly angry, he wouldn't have had the control it took to manage the physics of swinging the two unattached mattresses together through the wall. Apparently, as in werewolf fights, battles between vampires have a lot of impressive fireworks before the main show.

In the silence that followed, I heard something, a hoarse mewling noise coming from behind the closed bathroom door – as if whatever made it had already cried out so much it could only make a small noise, but one that held much more terror than a full-throated scream.

I wondered if Stefan knew what was in the bathroom and that was why he'd been afraid when we were in the parking lot – there were things that even a vampire ought to be afraid of. I took a deep breath, but all I could smell was the bitter darkness – and that was getting stronger. I sneezed, trying to clear my nose, but it didn't work. Both vampires stood still until the noise stopped. Then the stranger dusted his hands lightly, a small smile on his face as if there had not been rage just an instant before.

'I am remiss,' he said, but the old fashioned words sounded false coming from him, as if he were pretending to be a vampire the way the old vampires tried to be human. 'You obviously do not know who I am.'

He gave Stefan a shallow bow. It was obvious, even to me, that this vampire had grown up in a time and place where bowing was something done in Kung Fu Theater movies rather than in everyday life. 'I am Asmodeus,' he said grandly, sounding like a child pretending to be a king.

'I said you have no reputation,' Stefan replied, still in that light, careless voice. 'I didn't say I didn't know your name, Cory Littleton. Asmodeus was destroyed centuries ago.'

'Kurfel, then,' said Cory, nothing childlike in his manner at all.

I knew those names, Asmodeus and Kurfel, both, and as soon as I realized where I'd heard them, I knew what I had been smelling. Once the idea occurred to me, I realized the smell could be nothing else. Suddenly Stefan's fear wasn't surprising or startling at all. Demons were enough to scare anyone.

'Demon' is a catchall phrase, like 'fae,' used to describe beings who are unable to manifest themselves in our world in physical form. Instead, they possess their victims and feed upon them until there is nothing left. Kurfel wouldn't be this one's name, any more than Asmodeus was: knowing a demon's name gave you power over them. I'd never heard of a demon-possessed vampire before. I tried to stretch my mind around the concept.

'You are not Kurfel either,' said Stefan. 'Though something akin to him is allowing you some use of his powers when you amuse him well enough.' He looked toward the bathroom door. 'What *have* you been doing to amuse him, sorcerer?'

Sorcerer.

I thought those were just stories – I mean, who would be dumb enough to invite a demon into themselves? And why would a demon, who could just possess any corrupt soul (and to offer yourself to a demon sort of presupposes a corrupt soul, doesn't it?) make a deal with anyone? I didn't believe in sorcerers; I certainly didn't believe in vampire sorcerers.

I suppose somone raised by werewolves should have been more open-minded – but I had to draw the line somewhere.

'I don't like you,' Littleton said coolly, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up as magic gathered around him. 'I don't like you at all.'

He reached out and touched Stefan in the middle of the

forehead. I waited for Stefan to knock his hand aside, but he did nothing to defend himself, just dropped to his knees, landing with a heavy thud.

'I thought you'd be more interesting, but you're not.' Cory told him, but the diction and tone of his voice was different. 'Not amusing at all. I'll have to fix that.'

He left Stefan kneeling and went to the bathroom door.

I whined at Stefan and stretched up on my hind feet so I could lick his face, but he didn't even look at me. His eyes were vague and unfocused; he wasn't breathing. Vampires didn't need to, of course, but Stefan mostly did.

The sorcerer had bespelled him somehow.

I tugged at the leash, but Stefan's hand was still closed upon it. Vampires are strong, and even when I threw my whole thirty-two pounds into it, his hand didn't move. If I'd had half an hour I could have chewed through the leather, but I didn't want to be caught here when the sorcerer returned.

Panting, I looked across the room at the open bathroom. What new monster was waiting inside? If I got out of this alive, I'd never let anyone put a leash on me again. Werewolves have strength, semiretractable claws, and inch-long fangs – *Samuel* wouldn't have been caught by the stupid leather harness and leash. One bite and it would have been gone. All I had was speed – which the leash effectively limited.

I was prepared for a horrifying sight, something that could destroy Stefan. But what Cory Littleton dragged out of that room left me stunned with an entirely different sort of horror.

The woman wore one of those fifties-style uniforms that hotels give their maids; this one was mint green with a stiff blue apron. Her color scheme matched the drapes and the hallway carpets, but the rope around her wrists, dark with blood, didn't.

Other than her bleeding wrists, she seemed mostly

unharmed, though the sounds she was making made me wonder about that. Her chest was heaving with the effort of her screaming, but even without the bathroom door between us she wasn't making much noise, more of a series of grunts.

I jerked against the harness again and when Stefan still didn't move, I bit him, hard, drawing blood. He didn't even flinch.

I couldn't bear to listen to the woman's terror. She was breathing in hoarse gulping pants and she struggled against Littleton's hold, so focused on him that I don't think she saw Stefan or me at all.

I hit the end of the leash again. When that didn't work I snarled and snapped, twisting around so that I could chew on the leather. My own collar was equipped with a safety fastening that I could have broken, but Stefan's leather harness was fastened with old-fashioned metal buckles.

The sorcerer dropped his victim on the floor in front of me, just out of reach – though I'm not sure what I could have done for her even if I could get within touching distance. She didn't see me; she was too busy trying not to see Littleton. But my struggles had drawn the sorcerer's attention and he squatted down so he was closer to my level.

'I wonder what you'd do if I let you go?' he asked me. 'Are you afraid? Would you run? Would you attack me or does the smell of her blood rouse you as it does a vampire?' He looked up at Stefan then. 'I see your fangs, Soldier. The rich scent of blood and terror: it calls to us, doesn't it? They keep us leashed as tightly as you keep your coyote.' He used the Spanish pronunciation, three syllables rather than two. 'They demand we take only a sip from each when our hearts crave so much more. Blood is not really filling without death is it? You are old enough to remember the Before Times, aren't you, Stefan? When vampires ate as we chose and reveled in the terror and the last throes of our prey. When we fed truly.'

Stefan made a noise and I risked a glance at him. His eyes had changed. I don't know why that was the first thing I noticed about him, when so much else was different. Stefan's eyes were usually the shade of oiled walnut, but now they gleamed like blood-rubies. His lips were drawn back, revealing fangs shorter and more delicate than a werewolf's. His hand, which had tightened on my leash, bore curved claws on the ends of his elongated fingers. After a brief glimpse, I had to turn away, almost as frightened of him as I was of the sorcerer.

'Yes, Stefan,' said Littleton, laughing like the villain in an old black and white movie. 'I see you remember the taste of death. Benjamin Franklin once said that those who give up their freedom for safety deserve neither.' He leaned close. 'Do you feel safe, Stefan? Or do you miss what you once had, what you allowed them to steal from all of us.'

Littleton turned to his victim, then. She made very little noise when he touched her, her cries so hoarse that they would have been inaudible to a human outside of this room. I fought the harness until it cut into my shoulders but it did me no good. My claws tore holes in the carpet, but Stefan was too heavy for me to budge.

Littleton took a very long time to kill her: she quit struggling before I did. In the end the only noise in the room was from the vampires, the one in front of me feeding wetly and the one beside me making helpless, eager noises though he didn't move otherwise.

The woman's body convulsed and her eyes met mine, just for a moment, before they glazed over in death. I felt the rush of magic as she stilled and the rank bitterness, the scent of the demon, retreated from the room, leaving only a faint trace behind.

I could smell again, and almost wished I couldn't. The smells of death aren't much better than the scent of demon.

Panting, shaking, and coughing because I'd half strangled myself, I dropped to the floor. There was nothing I could do to help her now, if there ever had been.

Littleton continued to feed. I snuck a glance over at Stefan, who'd quit making those disturbing noises. He'd resumed his frozen stance. Even knowing that he'd been able to watch that scene with desire rather than horror, Stefan was infinitely preferable to Littleton, and I backed up until my hip bumped his thigh.

I huddled against him as Littleton, the white of his shirt all but extinguished beneath the blood of the woman he'd killed, looked up from his victim to examine Stefan's face. He was giggling a little in nervous pants. I was so scared of him, of the thing that had been riding him, I could barely breathe.

'Oh, you wanted that,' he crooned holding out a hand and brushing it over Stefan's lips. After a moment Stefan licked his lips clean.

'Let me share,' the other vampire said in a soft voice. He leaned into Stefan and kissed him passionately. He closed his eyes, and I realized that he was finally within my reach.

Rage and fear are sometimes only a hairbreadth different. I leapt, mouth open and latched onto Littleton's throat, tasting first the human blood of the woman on his skin, then something else, bitter and awful, that traveled from my mouth through my body like a jolt of lightning. I fought to close my jaw, but I'd missed my hold and my upper fangs hit the bone of his spine and bounced off.

I wasn't a werewolf or bulldog and I couldn't crush bone, only dig deeply into flesh as the vampire gripped my shoulders and tore himself loose, ripping the leash out of Stefan's grip as he struggled.

Blood, his blood this time, spilled over his front, but the wound began closing immediately, the vampire healing

himself even faster than a werewolf could have. In despair, I realized I hadn't seriously harmed him. He dropped me to the ground and backed away, his hands covering the wound I'd made. I felt his magic flare and when his hands fell away from his throat, the wound was gone.

He snarled at me, his fangs showing and I snarled back. I don't remember seeing him move, just the momentary feeling of his hands on my sides, a brief moment while I was hurled through the air and then nothing.