

“Whoa, boys, check out the wuss boy!”

Lloyd Becker wasn't known for his endearing manner. He loved trouble almost as much as he loved bullying his way into the hearts and faces of anyone who crossed his path. His charms were now turned on Mychael Lachlan, a tall, slight young man with long blonde hair and a poofy-sleeved shirt.

Lloyd liked to think of the Vault's parking lot as his personal playground. He and his three cronies rarely bothered to actually go into the club, especially since they often found some way of entertaining themselves outside of it.

His three leather clad henchmen backed Lloyd up as he continued his chain of insults. “That's a nice blouse . . . so when's the sex change operation?” He laughed at his feeble attempt at humor and his buddies followed suit.

Delia Hunter stepped out of the Vault's front doors with a hand up to her right ear. The relative quiet in the parking lot outside of Farmingham's most popular (and only) teen night club was a welcome relief to her buzzing ears, that is until her attention was sparked by the muscle bound bully and his cohorts. Delia stopped outside the club and watched the confrontation with interest. She hated bullies.

Mychael didn't care for fighting, it wasn't his thing. He tried reasoning with his persecutors. “I'm not looking for trouble. I just came out for a cigarette.” He held out his pack towards the group, “butt?”

Lloyd grabbed the whole pack and tucked them in his jacket pocket. “Thanks. I just ran out.” His boys laughed again. Delia noted that the gang seemed to be staying out of Lloyd's game. Delia detected an ominous tone in Lloyd's voice. “I don't like you. You shouldn't be here.”

Delia started walking toward the group.

Lloyd raised a fist and directed a snarl at the young man.

Delia stepped into hearing range and tried to break up the incident with a feigned tone of familiarity towards Mychael. “Hey there, slick. Are you causing problems again?”

“Um...no...” The young man stammered out to the woman in combat boots and fatigues. His eyes didn't leave her. Delia wondered if perhaps she had a zit or something that was more threatening than the meatheads surrounding the kid. She turned her attention to Lloyd, the meathead in a leather-jacket and red bandana. “Hey, look, Slick here's really sorry to have offended your delicate sensibilities.”

She grabbed Mychael's arm and started to tug him away. “He'll stay out of your way. C'mon you.”

A meaty hand grabbed Mychael's arm just above her grip followed by a gruff voice, “Hey! How about you stay out of this little girl or we might just have some fun with you.”

Delia let go of Mychael's arm and turned back to look at Lloyd.

“Why not let this whole thing drop?” Delia suggested as she grabbed Lloyd's forearm digging her right fingers into the tendons to force him to release Mychael. She seized

Lloyd's shoulder with her left hand, forcing his arm back and pushing him away. As others started to come to Lloyd's rescue, Delia was thinking she might have miscalculated the situation. Again.

Lloyd and two cronies came at her in a concerted attack. As she intercepted their flurry of blows, the last thug caught her from behind in a sleeper hold. While she was struggling against her captor, the radio slipped out of her pocket. She heard the slight click of the transmit button as it hit the ground. "Damn, I should've called Raine . . ." she thought just as a punch to the stomach introduced two rapid jabs to her face. She lost track of how many walloping blows followed as her oxygen flow was cut off. The buzzing in her ears presaged her loss of consciousness.



Toughest Girl in Town

By Jill Irving & Hector Diaz

“Delia!”
Raine MacEnroe and Wyllette Hansford burst out of the Vault in response to the commotion outside. The hoods bolted out of the parking lot. They saw Delia and Mychael on the ground, both of them recovering from their beating.

Raine knelt next to Delia while Wylie looked at the departing gang of four. “Should I go after them? I can get them”

Raine waved Wylie down. As slayers, they made a formidable pair. Both of them were stronger than your average bear, and they trained together to put that strength to its best use. Their evenings when not enjoying a night at the Vault were spent in the pursuit and obliteration of vampires and other creatures of the night that Farmingham was in no shortage of. Raine and Wylie were vampire slayers, with supernatural powers to match. Delia was a tough cookie who could hold her own in a fight, but Raine was getting fed up with her taking on more than she can handle. It was as if Delia either had something to prove, or simply had a death wish.

“What the hell is wrong with you? We were thirty seconds away and you had your radio. Why-didn't- you- call- for- help?” Raine punctuated each word with a finger pointed at Delia's bruised face.”

Wylie interrupted Raine's upcoming rant. "Hey, looks like the Deliamobile is on its way." In the distance they heard the sound of an ambulance siren heading toward the Vault.

The emergency room at Farmingham Medical was laced with its usual buzz of activity and concerned patients. Raine and Wylie stood on either side of Delia's hospital bed. The cramped quarters were separated from the other beds by a thin curtain. Raine wanted to rip into Delia like she knew her own guardian Mercy would have reamed her if she had done something as stupid, but the lack of privacy commanded that she keep things to an impassioned whisper . . .

"Why do you always have to play the hero?" Raine questioned. "Are you trying to get dead? Dead doesn't help. Dead not good, remember?"

Wylie chimed in to Delia's defense. "Maybe she just loves hospital food? Or male nurses! You check out that last guy rolling the gurney down there? Hurt me!"

Raine gave Wylie a parental glare "Between boy-happy and Death-wish here why do you two question why I like doing things alone!"

Delia held up her hand. "I didn't start it. I was just trying to help Slick."

"Yeah. I'm sure you tried to avoid a confrontation..." Raine's remark dripped sarcasm.

"Like she always does." Wylie agreed.

"Enough!" Delia shouted above them. "I did what I had to do. I'm not hurt that badly, so thank you for the rescue. Now drop it."

Raine raised her hands in frustration. "Fine, we're out of here. Next fight you're on your own. C'mon Wylie, I need something to punch."

Raine walks away, Wylie turns to Delia before following after her leather coated friend. "Great, now I'm going to have to keep her out of trouble. This is really cutting into my social time." A young male intern walks by and catches Wylie's eye with a smile. Wylie turns to see him walking away. "Hmmm . . . damn these slayer healing powers."

Mychael came around the corner of the screen just after Wylie rounded it.

He smiled at Delia. "Hey! I get to go home." His clothes were a bit ripped, but he had no visible injuries. "I wanted to thank you for helping me. You okay?" He looked over the much more visible signs of violence, especially the blossoming bruise spreading from her eye, down her cheek and ending in a bloody cut at the edge of her mouth.

"It's nothing that won't go away in a few days." She touched her face, "well, maybe a week or so. You look like you'll survive" she observed.

"Just got some bruising around the ribs and kidneys, nothing that shows, fortunately. I'd be in worse trouble if they'd hurt my hands. I'm a musician. Kind of need the hands."

"Yeah, I guess they help." Delia agreed.

"They help at my job too. I work at the Vault, in the kitchen, part-time...until I hit it big or graduate...whichever comes first."

“Um...should I know you?” Delia asked.

“No, I guess not. I’m pretty new at school, but I know you. You come in with that kid... Trim. In the kitchen we’re petitioning for combat pay whenever he comes into the club. You’re the one that everyone calls G.I. Jane.”

“Who calls me that? I need names!” She glared.

“Just some people...your real name is Delia, right? I’m Mychael Lachlan.” He added nervously.

“Mychael” Delia nodded her head. Their conversation was cut short by the entrance of a tall distinguished man with a graying beard and a stethoscope around his neck.

“Thanks again for the help, Delia. I should go.” Mychael’s awkwardness making Delia smile as he left.

Doctor Brody allowed Mychael to pass him, and then his eyes focused on Delia.

“You again!”

In front of the hospital, Mychael had just mounted his Kawasaki. As he started to don his helmet, he noticed Delia walking gingerly out of the hospital. Obviously in need of some help.

“Hey, they let you go! Need a ride?” He called out to her.

“No. I’m all set.”

“Your car isn’t here.” He observed.

“I need to walk it off.”

“Oh, yeah...you really look up to that.”

She was about to argue more when her knee chose to remind her it didn’t like being twisted.

“What is this? Pick on the wounded night?” She sighed and limped over to him. “Fine, but only to shut you up.”

He grinned at her bravado and handed her his spare helmet. “Sure, whatever you say.”

Mychael was careful to provide Delia with as comfortable a ride as possible but the vibrations from the bike had set all her bruises to aching. Once they reached her house, Delia dismounted slowly She gritted her teeth to keep the pain down and handed over the helmet.

“Well, thanks Mychael. I guess I’ll see you at school.”

“I’d like that.” He removed his own helmet to allow his blue eyes to focus on her as he suggested hopefully “Maybe at the Vault tomorrow night?”

“Probably not, I’ve got to write this request to get into Kid’s Boot Camp this summer. It needs to go out in a couple days. I’m trying to convince the commanding officer to sponsor me. It could take a while to word it right.”

“And you can’t do it some other time...?”

“It’s important to me. Besides, I hung at the Vault tonight, and look where it got me.” She turned and walked to the door, hiding her limp as much as she could.

Mychael tugged his helmet back on his head, and then looked back at her form retreating into the house. She was bound and determined not to show her pain. He shook his head in consternation, and admiration for her before he revved his engine and took off from the house.

Inside, Delia was greeted by her grandmother.
I “You’re hurt again!” Grams scolded.

“I was trying to...”

Grams held out her hand. “Always with the explanations! Save it for your mother. Is it bad?”

“No. My knee is a little twisted, but should be fine with some rest.”

Grams ran her finger lightly over Delia’s injured cheek. “Hmmm, that’ll be pretty in the morning.”

“There goes my social life” Delia remarked, not that it mattered much to her. Most of her time was spent training or hanging out with Raine. With the former she was generally alone . . . and well, with Raine she was generally alone. Raine had issues lately, and Delia had concerns. In a recent adventure Raine was almost killed by a vampire, in the end, it was Raine’s father who took the fall. That left Raine scared, angry and over protective. Everyone in their circle of friends compensated for Raine’s situation right now. Delia however worried more about what didn’t happen . . . what if Raine had been turned into a vampire?

Grams banished the thought.

“Who’s the boy?” Grams nodded her head to the window behind Delia where Mychael could be seen pulling away from the curb.

Delia turned and peered out the window. “Mychael, he’s a musician.” She smiled slightly. “He likes to wear pirate shirts.”

Dolores smiled and slid her hand gently down Delia’s turned shoulder. “Sounds nice!”

“He’s normal.” Delia replied, her eyes following the motorcycle as it started to depart.

“Now for you, that is unusual!” Grams exited the hall leaving Delia at the window.

Delia’s brows shot up into her bangs as she noticed a shadowy shape silently following Mychael away. It flowed behind him like a wake. It wasn’t a shadow, the lighting was wrong and it was making its own movements. She threw open the door to warn him, but he was too far away to hear her. He was oblivious to the free-standing shadow in pursuit.

Delia closed the door slowly and considered calling Jacqueline or Raine, but a glance at the wall clock told her it wouldn't be her best plan.

When Delia walked into the MacEnroe barn at quarter of four, Raine was no where to be found. She wasn't surprised really. If she had been able to sleep properly the night before, she wouldn't have been there either. Overnight she had kept seeing the odd shadow following Mychael.

Delia walked to her stall. When she'd asked Raine for a little space in the barn, she'd been expecting a space on a shelf or something, not an entire stall. During the cleanup of the barn Delia worked twice as hard as a thank you to Raine for the unexpected boon. She had contemplated picking up some inexpensive paint to "finish" her new space, but her present cash-flow was not up to the task.

Her father's old military-issue footlocker sat below a couple of shelves. It held the majority of her precious new clothing purchased for her by her friend T.J. Delia carried a package she had received from T.J. in the mail yesterday which she greatly suspected contained some replacement fatigues. She carefully unwrapped the package to reveal three sets of fatigues, a set of standard green, a set of desert camouflage, and a blue jumpsuit most frequently worn by air force pilots. She held each item against herself, then folded them neatly and placed them on the shelf above the footlocker.

Delia stepped into the center of the barn that had been set up as a makeshift dojo for Raine to train. Since Raine wasn't around, Delia decided to attempt some tricks she hadn't done for years. She started easily with a couple cartwheels and handstands, but that was just practice. Giving herself lots of room across the floor, she ran into a round-off back handspring. It had been a long time since she'd taken gymnastics, but her body seemed to remember the moves.

The sound of clapping caught her attention and she turned to see Raine standing in the entryway.

"You're late!" Delia accused.

"No, you're early." Raine said pulling her jacket off. "It's just gone four."

Delia shrugged, "I couldn't sleep, thought I'd try some moves I haven't tried in a while."

"Gymnastics?" Raine asked starting her own warm-up routine. "Could be useful" Raine observed.

"It was a concession to my mother. Gymnastics builds strength, balance, and reflexes. All of those things would be useful in fighting, not to mention the marines." She launched into a handless cartwheel which ended in a slightly wobbly landing.

"I'm surprised you are here after the beating you took last night." Raine's dry tone made Delia's hackles rise so she took a couple deep breaths before responding.

"I wasn't hurt that badly. Yeah, I've got some bruises, but I've had much worse."

Raine completed a complicated set of moves that ended with yet another post needing to be replaced. She turned to Delia and focused her considerable attention on her. "Damn it

Delia, you were unconscious for several minutes. You had a lump on your head the size of a baseball.”

“You’re exaggerating...”

“You’re in denial. Wylie and I were really worried you’d done yourself in this time. You’ve got to stop going Rambo without backup. We could have been there immediately. It’s not girlie to get backup; it’s smart.”

Delia closed her eyes and shook her head; when she opened them, she was glaring at Raine. “Really, I’m fine.” Delia’s tone indicated she was done with the conversation. “So are you up to doing some hand-to-hand?”

“Sure.” Raine moved into place, being ‘up to’ some hand to hand meant that while giving Delia a challenge, Raine could work on her control. She was likely to put Delia in the hospital herself if she actually let loose on her. Delia was an exceptional fighter who obviously could take a beating, but there was no sense in that beating coming from a friend. Raine was tired of hospitals. “I saw you getting a ride home with the new guy.”

“Yeah, He was kind of insistent.” Delia dodged a blow. “Actually, I wanted to mention that to you anyway.”

“You need romantic advice? I’m the last person you should be asking.”

“No, it’s not like that with him. As he left my house, I saw this shadowy thing following him, like the scene in Peter Pan when Peter’s chasing his shadow. It seemed, you know, Farmingham weird.”

Raine considered for a moment as she and Delia continued to trade blows. “Interesting, I guess its worth checking out. Where do we find him?”

“His name is Mychael Lachlan. I think he said he was working at the Vault.” Delia ducked under a blow and tried to dump Raine on her butt, but Raine jumped over the leg swipe.

“Name sounds familiar...wait...I’ve got it. I think he’s playing at the Vault tonight.”

“Really?” Delia probed. “Maybe that’s why he wanted to see me there.”

Raine grinned and raised her eyebrow. "Or maybe a true blue rocker has an eye on you!"

Delia sighed. “It really isn’t like that.”

“Yeah, whatever!”

Eight thirty on a Friday night, what attractive girl wouldn’t want to be out patrolling for vampires? Raine decided to focus on the vault. Of course, Jacqueline would lecture her on her responsibilities as the slayer . . . then at home, Mercy would lecture her on going off looking for trouble at all. Someday Raine would have to lock those two up in a room just so she can get a straight story.

At a car nearby, a guy was trying to hustle his girl for a quickie. It looked like she wasn’t going for it. Raine veered in their direction hoping to settle things just by being in the vicinity when she realized the guy had on his game face. A louse and a vampire all in

one, Raine was off to a good night. She sprang over the front of the car and leapt feet-first into his face. The girl fell against the car, while the vamp slapped pavement. He was up in a moment and racing back at her. Raine shoved the girl into the car and met the vamp's face with her fist. His head snapped around with the momentum, but he rebounded quickly.

Raine slapped her hands back onto the car for leverage and kicked both legs in a one-two combination to the vamp's head. As he staggered back, she pulled her stake out of her inside jacket pocket and thrust out.

"...get the point?" she asked as he dissolved into dust. "Guess so." She nodded to herself and looked back to the car.

The girl sat halfway in the car, confused. "What'd you do?"

"I saved your sweet butt. Make like E.T. and phone home."

The girl did not hesitate, she ran in a panic toward the club as if she were to be Raine's next target. Raine watched her run into the Vault. She wasn't sure if her eyes were deceiving her, but it seemed like a shadowy figure had slipped into the building before the door clicked shut. "Hoorah . . .guess I'd better investigate... listen to some tunes, get something to drink . . ." she said to herself as she entered the Vault.

The inside was as packed with high school students as always. The music was coming from the surround sound system; the feature performer hadn't started playing. In the bright lights, she headed upstairs but couldn't see the shadow.

Below she spotted Delia sitting at the usual table chatting with Trim. Seeing nothing more she could do, she headed down to greet them. Raine saw movement in the blackness of the stage as a stagehand finished setting up the equipment. As she approached her friends, the overhead lights were dimmed in preparation for the spotlights.

Raine leaned forward in front of Delia, placing her hands on the table. "So you decided to come see him play after all?" Raine raised her eyebrow.

"Trim begged me to come with him. He was afraid he'd get beaten up if he came alone." Delia explained as she rested a firm hand on Trim's shoulder. "I figured I better take care of him since you and Wylie are busy with the slayage."

"And a certain attractive performer had nothing to do with it..."

"Who?" Delia asked innocently.

"Riiiggghhhh!" Raine drawled. "Just wanted to let you know I saw that shadow thingy you were talking about entering the club. I'm going to go back outside and make sure it didn't double back. You two be careful in here with Mr. It's-Not-Like-That." She winked at Delia before pushing back through the crowd to the exit.

Trim turned to Delia. "Who's attractive? You find someone attractive? You must! Raine never winks . . ."

"You shut up. "

Before Trim could respond, a voice on the overhead announced, “Ladies and Gentleman, it is with great pleasure the Vault welcomes one of its own, Mychael Lachlan.” Rather unenthusiastic applause greeted the announcement, but many in the audience did turn toward the stage as Mychael entered from stage right, plugged his guitar into an amp and turned on his mike.

The opening chords of a soft ballad rang through the air. Words, in a clear baritone voice drifted into the tune, as the song poured forth feelingly from Mychael’s lips. Just as the song seemed to be reaching its conclusion, three other teenagers walked onto stage, sitting behind the other instruments. As Mychael held the last note and the guitar fell to silence, the drummer tapped his sticks together three times launching the band into a new, rocking rhythm.

“Man, I was afraid this guy was going to be completely zzz-worthy.” Trim observed as the band switched to the new song.

“I don’t know. I thought it was nice, kind of Sting-like.” Delia ventured.

Trim glared at her. He thought to chant ‘Delia’s got a boyfriend’, but thinking that leaving the club on his own legs seemed preferable. Finally he chose to say it as he got up to go the men’s room...fast.

Raine walked around the parking lot twice. She tried looking in cars and around corners. She’d stopped and tried to sense a problem. She’d listened suspiciously for strange noises. Still nothing seemed to suggest anything odd was going on at the club.

It was as she stood contemplating whether to go back to patrolling or stay around the Vault that she finally noticed something peculiar. As she moved around in the shifting light from the building, her own shadow was not following her. In fact, she couldn’t find it at all. Raine shifted to a couple different locations that she was sure should allow her to cast a shadow, but still none was evident.

After a few moments, she realized that the entire parking lot was covered in one very large shadow.

Raine backed away from the building and looked up towards the lights above, including the nearly full moon. Math wasn’t Raine’s best subject, but she was pretty sure that the building shouldn’t have blocked the moonlight. Even so, it did not shine onto the ground beneath her; there was only more shadow.

Her senses kicked into high gear when the light of the moon finally started shifting onto her. The entire shadow that had been covering the parking lot slid towards the Vault, leaving Raine’s own shadow standing beside her, just as it should have been all along.

“Hey! Get back here!”

Raine rushed towards the Vault as the dark mass enveloped the club; its murky nature shutting out the lights that had blazed from the roof.

Reaching for the shadow wrapped door handle, Raine expected to “touch” the shadow. Before she could feel the door in her hand, her mind was filled with the image of her father being held by a vampire . . . having his brains scrambled, taking the hit for her.

Raine screamed “No” as she had then and the world came back into focus. Concern for Delia and everyone else inside the club consumed her as she rushed to a window on the side and threw herself against it. Her force should have thrust her through the window, but instead she bounced harmlessly off with yet another head-rush of bad memories . . . this time of her mother dying in Mercy’s arms in some Boston alley. Again, Rain shook off the vision by keeping herself away from the shadow.

She stood away from the building. “Easy for me to do...but what about everyone inside? Jacqueline, I hope you’re not sleeping.”

Delia was just starting to relax and enjoy the wide variety of music the band was playing. Other students had started dancing. Even Trim seemed to be enjoying the eclectic mix of covers and original songs.

A single scream split the air and stopped the music mid-note. Delia instantly started looking for the source. She saw the shadow slipping in through a crack in the floor in front of a spastic screaming girl.

Other screams started to erupt around the room as the shadow crept through seams around windows, doors and other crevices, throwing everyone it touched into fits of tears, screams or paralyzing fear. Delia turned to the stage, waving her arms to gain Mychael’s attention.

“Mychael, tell them to quiet down and get away from the walls.” She shouted in a vain effort to be heard over the panicked yelling.

Delia looked at Trim. “Know any mojo that would be good against...that? Maybe something light-based? Like force lightning?” Trim had his own special talents, the kind that delved into the mystical. He was just starting to get a grasp of his power, but clearly had a knack for it.

“I’ve got one light spell, but I don’t want to hit anyone accidentally.” Trim volunteered. “Well, maybe some of them . . . but that’s just personal.”

“Focus! Give me a minute to clear some people away from the shadow, and then do your thing.”

She waded into the crowd, speaking firmly to each frightened kid, herding them away from the shadow and out of Trim’s way. Closer to the wall, the kids no longer seemed panicked; many had entered a trancelike state. As Delia watched one boy yell “no, no” and run around the room as if he were being chased. Delia could see a touch of the shadow substance crawling across the skin of his arm.

Delia pushed the last of the crowd out of the way of the shadow, careful not to touch any portion of the shadow herself.

“TRIM!” She yelled sprinting back to the table.

“*Dissolvo*” Trim bellowed throwing out his hands toward the shadow on the wall. A flash of light exploded against the shadow and sent part of it skittering back out of the club, but the bulk of it remained inside.

“We need more! Bigger!” She called to Trim.

“I’ll see what I can do.” He called. “Where’s Yoda when I need him?” Trim concentrated a moment and forced more power out toward another segment of the wall.

Delia glanced up the stage and saw the musicians gathered at the edge of the stage. Mychael’s eyes were wide with horror.

“DELIA!” He howled to warn her as a wave of shadow broke away from the wall and roared across the students to reach Delia.

“NO, NO, STOP! LEAVE HER...”

She turned just in time to see it reach out tentacle-like appendages to grab her. She instantly dissolved into a world out of her nightmares.

“... ALONE!”

At the payphone outside, Raine braced the receiver against her shoulder as the phone rang. On the other end, Jacqueline answered.

“Masson residence”

“Did you order the pizza with extra garlic?”

“Good evening Raine. I do hope you have better things to do.”

“I have trouble. Big unshakeable trouble.”

“Specifics” Jacqueline’s tone became sharp and business-like.

Delia stood in front of her father, Jack Hunter, in a gymnasium. The condemnation in his voice was enough to bring tears to Delia’s eyes. “I wanted a son. Do you think you’ll ever be good enough to make up for that?”

“But you always said you were proud...”

“I was glad that you weren’t a sniveling little girl like your mother. But proud? How could a man like me ever be proud of a wimpy little girl?” He sneered.

“But Dad...”

Raine suddenly appeared striding up behind him. Delia had not seen her enter. “He’s right you know. You think you’ll ever be slayer material? It just pisses you off that despite all your training, you know deep down that Wylie and me can take you down with a thought, like kicking sand on some dweeb at the beach.”

“No...” Delia threw her shoulders back further to fight the onslaught of emotion.

Raine laughed as she put an arm around Jack’s shoulders. Together they both laughed at Delia. “So Jack, did you have to hold back when training with this wimp like I’ve had to. Damn it’s hard to get a good workout when she’s in the way.”

Jack’s laughter grew louder. “You felt that too? Maybe she needs more incentive to do better...”

Delia's emotions converged into shock as she saw Raine's face suddenly grow pale and leathery, ripples of flesh appeared on her forehead, all becoming very familiar as Raine's laughter became a growl, and her mouth a jagged orifice of fangs.

Raine pulled Jack toward her and ripped out his throat before he could take one evasive action. He dropped to the ground, a dead sack of flesh. Raine turned her blood-stained face back to Delia, pieces of Jack's throat still hanging from the sides of her mouth. "Maybe this is incentive enough?"

Delia's first thought was that she couldn't win. Raine swept in raking Delia's face with her clawed hands followed immediately by a split jump that sent Delia sprawling on the floor. She felt skin flop around the deep gashes on her face. She was loosing blood fast, another blow would kill her.

Raine stood over Delia. "This isn't even fun."

Delia kicked her feet, pushing herself away from Raine. Raine raised an eyebrow. "Oh, how Friday-the-13th of you! We're all alone; you want to waste some time screaming for help too?"

"No, this isn't right." Delia whispered. "This isn't how things are." She looked over at her father, his blood spilling steadily across the floor. His eyes were the wide stare of death, but what had been more shocking, more defeating, had been his words.

"Yum, tastes good, less filling." the Raine-vamp snickered, "he can't do much for you now."

"NO" Delia yelled. "This isn't real. You and Dad never met. You couldn't. He was already dead when I met you." Delia ignored her pain and straightened herself up "This isn't real." As Raine stalked up to her for the coup d grace, Delia threw up her hands.

"Ignus Incende"

A bolt of power erupted from Delia's hands and slammed the Raine-vamp in the chest immediately engulfing her in flames.

"Yes! None of this is real, so I can pretty much do whatever I want . . ."

Without hesitation, Delia pulled a stake from her pocket and charged into the flaming Raine, ignoring the heat, ignoring the pain, and slamming the stake into Raine's vulnerable heart.

Jacqueline's car pulled into the parking lot of the Vault. Raine sat on the hood of a car nearest to the now impenetrable front doors. Jacqueline didn't bother to park; she simply stopped in front of Raine and stepped out of her car. This girl was becoming more troublesome than Jacqueline expected of a slayer. Watcher's trained Slayers. Slayers were supposed to be students of the occult so they could do their own research. Good researchers shouldn't need to wake up their instructors in the middle of the night as often as Raine did Jacqueline.

"You know, Raine . . . this was not a difficult matter to research. You could have done it."

"But I was here and you were available. Why waste the brain cells. I might need them later."

"Already delegating, I see."

"I like to think of it as avoiding the dull stuff. What did you find?"

Jacqueline turned at the sound of screams coming from inside the Vault. "Well, we're a bit late. We're dealing with a Soulshade. They attach themselves to newborns and live their lives as shadows. A host can live its entire life without knowing it is infected by a demonic parasite. However, sometimes a creature becomes very protective, even possessive, of its host and will try to strike out against perceived threats."

Another scream echoed from within. Raine stood up. "Well, it's apparently in a jealous tizzy. The host must be Delia's new beau, which would make it likely that Delia its target."

"Delia?" Jacqueline raised her brows and paused in surprise. "I suppose it should be expected that you girls take an interest in boys but . . ."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, um, . . . an interest in romance. But does it have to be with demons?"

"You are grumpy in the middle of the night. How do we get in?"

"We can't. We have to wait and see if Delia is strong enough to handle it from inside."

The gym around Delia disintegrated into a mass of dust. She blinked her eyes to adjust to the new scene. She glanced around the Vault. All around her student's were starting to come around, still dazed in the after effects of their nightmares.

The shadow was nowhere to be seen.

Trim stepped forward and grabbed Delia's now shadow less arm. "Are you okay?" He queried his tone ripe with concern.

"I think so." Delia replied laying her hand on top of his. She looked around finally turning to see Mychael on his knees at the edge of the stage. He looked worn and weak.

"What happened?" Delia asked Trim.

"The shadow attacked you. It had you completely covered. You were yelling and swinging; it was terrible. Mychael was over there pleading with it, as if it would listen to him. Then all of sudden, the shadow left you, left everyone, and went across the room into him. The only thing missing was a good ole burp."

Delia nodded slowly and crossed the room to the stage.

"Delia" Mychael murmured in a ragged voice. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"What is it?" She asked.

The doors to the club opened and Jacqueline strode in with Raine behind her. Jacqueline was cranky. "It was a psychic manifestation from a parasite. How long have you been a host to this creature, young man?"

“I’m not really sure, but it’s been tied to me since I was a kid. It only comes up when I’m angry . . . something I learned not to do very often.”

Raine stepped away to make sure the other club goers were doing well.

Delia helped Mychael get up as Jacqueline explained. “It is summoned by strong emotions, are you certain you were not angry today, perhaps over a certain recent altercation?”

He looked down. “No, things like that don’t bother me. If I’ve had any strong emotions it was quite the . . .”

He looks at Delia.

“...opposite.”

Delia looked down at the floor and shoved her hands in her pockets. “You’ll have to control it.” Delia admonished lifting her eyes. “You can’t have this thing go all stalker-like on every girl who floats your boat.”

“I know.” He looked back up at her. “But...”

“I can help you with that.” Jacqueline offered. Delia started walking away. Mychael watched her as she departed.

“Really?”

Raine came up behind Mychael. “Really, but you’ll have to put in some time after school though.”

“I know you. You’re that tough girl at school; you run a garage or something. “

“That’s me, buddy. But you’ll have to look elsewhere for the toughest girl in town. She just left the building.”