

When the red light receded, Daytona felt ill but found himself on familiar ground—he was home, in one of the many sitting rooms that Catarina had decorated according to her taste. The flames from the fireplace cast dancing shadows across the ceiling and walls, but the uncertain light was enough to limn the Widow, who waved to him with her remaining arm from a far corner of the room, and Cassidy Durango’s back as she hunched over the scarred surface of an antique table. Cassidy was busy sorting bullets into neat piles determined by their caliber.

Without turning to face him, Cassidy said, “I almost didn’t think it would work, but I guess you can be summoned like some sort of demon if the cause is needful.”

“What’s going on here?”

Kassidy’s shoulders fell.

“Your home was invaded from within, Daytona. A small army of devils traipsed through your halls. Catarina was taken; servants were killed. We tried to stop them, but it happened too fast.”

Daytona swore under his breath.

“They left an open Hellmouth yawning in your cellar,” Cassidy continued. “I reckon you and I both know that’s a trap. They expect you to come calling. And I know nothin’ I could say would stop you from charging into Hell after her. But much to my surprise, you’re a more popular fella than I would have suspected because you won’t be going down there alone.”

The Widow moved to stand beside Cassidy. Both women were resolute.

“Thank you,” Daytona said quietly.

“Well, don’t thank me just yet. You’re not going to be happy about the fourth member of our little posse.”

A slight figure, so still she had gone unnoticed, rose from an armchair by the fire. Her purple and gold dress would have cost the yearly profits of a merchant empire. She was unarmed, but she had no need of weapons; she exuded a menace so palpable that it wrapped itself around one’s throat like a python even to look upon her. Her grin displayed her perfect ivory fangs.

Daytona’s hand instinctively went to his gun.

Kassidy raised a hand. “Now, hear her out. She just turned up on your doorstep the day after we were attacked. She’s the one who brought you here so quickly. You owe her for that, at least.”

“Countess Alcesta...why would you help me?”

“Oh, the look on dear Magnus’s face when he learns that **We** helped save his bloodchild will be delicious. Besides, **We’ve** never seen Hell before and **We’re** sure **We** will be amused by such a novel experience.”

Kassidy watched in horror as the Countess brought a glass of red fluid—certainly not wine—to her lips. “I’m not sure we can stop her from going with us, if she’s of a mind to accompany us,” she stated flatly.

The Widow put her hand on Daytona’s arm. “We will get her back.”

“By my eye and hand, by the guns I wear, and in the name of my mother, I swear we will,” Cassidy added.

Alcesta was at their side in an instant; none had seen her move.

“**We** pledge **Our** aid to your quest, dhampir.” The firelight caught the Countess’s eyes and made them gleam red. “Come, gather your weapons. **We** would see the fires of Hell before daylight breaks. Shall we?”

The Countess gestured with her hand and, disconcertingly, as if she were already intimately familiar with the building's layout, proceeded toward the stairs that would lead down to the gaping portal, beyond which Hell awaited.