

The Incident at Saint Mariah's
Part Three: Conspiracies
3/30-4/2/2014

(a week later)

...

Allison hummed a cheery tune as she straightened out her nurse's garb, making sure the top and pants were free of wrinkles...

...then, she chuckled softly.

"Almost like I'm getting ready for a date," the gazelle chided herself.

Well, you are, her brain countered. *Face facts honey...you've been obsessed over that vixen since day one.*

Well...yeah, she admitted. *She's very cute...and funny...and charming...*

...and a patient, her brain countered. *Oh, and let's not forget...she's a **VAMPIRE!***

Allison chuckled, closing the door of her locker.

Well...no one said life was perfect, she told herself as she turned away from the locker.

...

Allison smiled as she sauntered to the nurse's station, a cup of coffee in her hands.

"Hey Allison," Nickie said, the calico's nose sniffing the air. "Wait...is that coffee?"

The gazelle nodded, slipping past the seated calico and plucking the keyring off of its hook.

"REAL coffee?" the calico mewled, a pleading tone

entering her voice.

Allison chuckled...then walked to the desk, setting the cup down on the counter.

"Mocha latte...just like you wanted," Allison stated.

The calico let out a soft squeal of delight...then cradled the coffee cup in her paws.

"Oooooohhh....my precious little latte...I will cherish every single sip of you, yes I will," Nickie chirped, fawning over the cup, petting it gently.

Allison laughed, shaking her head as she walked out of the nurse's station and down the hall.

She stopped at what had become her usual hangout...and began opening the door to Tara's room, slipping each key gently into each respective lock and deftly opening the locks.

Then, she smiled...as she pushed the door open just a little bit...

...and slipped inside, closing the door behind her.

"Morning, Allison," came a soft reply.

The gazelle looked over toward the bed...and smiled.

The red vixen was laying in her bed...arms and legs secured by the heavy restraints...the vixen's eyes still closed.

"Guess no one can ever sneak up on you, Tara," Allison quipped, unlatching the restraints from the vixen's legs.

"I'm sure they could," the vixen stated. "I've always been a light sleeper though."

The gazelle chuckled, her small tail flicking as she released the vixen's arms and gently helped her sit up.

"So...what is on the agenda for today?" Allison asked, sitting down on the bed next to the vixen.

Tara rubbed the back of her neck...then yawned, opening her muzzle very wide...

...and Allison saw inside the vixen's mouth for the first time...and noticed that the vixen's canine teeth were rather large. Almost to the point where...

...almost to where they could be fangs, Allison thought, a slight ripple shooting through her pelt.

"I think...maybe a blood draw," Tara stated...then looked at the gazelle, a smile crossing her muzzle. "Mine, not yours...at least, not yet."

Allison let out a nervous chuckle...then got up off the bed.

Tara slipped up off the bed, padding over to the desk...then powered on her computer.

"But first, a little background," the vixen stated, smoothing out her fur with one paw as she operated the mouse with the other.

"Background?" Allison asked, edging closer to the desk.

The red vixen nodded...and Allison watched...

...as an image popped up, one filled with red ovals.

"That...is a picture of my blood, from when I first arrived here," Tara stated. "So that's...what, two years old, give or take?"

Awed, Allison nodded. "That's...that's really your blood?"

Tara nodded. "It is. From a microscope slide I made

not long after arriving here."

Allison watched...as the vixen closed down that image...then brought up a second image.

This one had fewer red ovals...but a black fibrous material had taken over parts of the image, connecting to some of the red ovals.

"That...is from about six months later," Tara stated. "Notice the black masses in it?"

Allison slowly nodded, still in awe and shock.

"Those black things...seem to be what a vampire's blood becomes, as the condition progresses," Tara stated, then turned to look at her. "I think that those things...the vampire cells for lack of a better description...actually consume the red blood cells of the host, converting them into something."

Allison looked from the vixen, back to the image on the screen.

"But...if that's the case...wouldn't a transfusion or plasmocentesis remove those vampire cells?" Allison asked.

Silence greeted her ears...so Allison looked at the red vixen.

The vixen was smiling at her...and she nodded.

"A good theory, Allison," the vixen said...and Allison felt something in the vixen's tone.

Respect.

"It could be possible to use that method to essentially strain out the vampire cells out of the blood," the vixen mused, turning back to the screen. "However, it'd likely have to be tried very early on in the process."

Allison crouched near the vixen, looking at her.

"How soon after?"

Tara sighed...and shrugged.

"I don't know...maybe less than two months, I'd guess," the vixen admitted.

Allison nodded. "That way, it's done early enough...before a large number of cells are contaminated."

Tara nodded. "Still...that is a good idea. Maybe it can be used for others..." The vixen fell silent for a bit...then sighed. "Anyways...today we're going to collect another sample of my blood and see what has changed."

Allison watched...as the vixen opened a drawer...and pulled out a small metal basin with something rattling about inside it.

The gazelle peeked inside...

...and saw a syringe resting inside the empty metal basin, obviously well-used.

She looked at the vixen...who shrugged.

"I'm a vampire, apparently," the vixen stated. "A dirty needle isn't going to really bother me...but you can go get a clean one if you want to."

"I think I will," Allison stated, reaching for the used needle...

...only to have the vixen grab her wrist, gently yet firmly.

"Leave it," the vixen stated.

Allison looked at Tara, who held her gaze.

"That really can't be put in a Sharp's box," the vixen stated.

Allison slowly nodded...and the vixen released her

arm...

...and Allison rubbed her wrist lightly, shocked by how strong the vixen's grip was.

She...she could've easily snapped my wrist, she thought.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" the vixen asked, her voice tinged with genuine concern.

Allison shook her head...then padded to the door.

"I'll be back with a few syringes," the gazelle stated, slipping back out of the room.

...

Allison shook a bit as she grabbed a handful of packaged syringes.

Her touch...just so cold!

The gazelle shut her eyes...and took a few deep breaths.

So cold...so strong...she could've...

The gazelle shuddered again.

All that strength...that power...

Then, the gazelle's eyes flew open.

And all that's holding all that power in...is her conscience...

The gazelle shook her head, trying to clear it.

No...no, she's a strong person. She can beat this.

Oh come ON! her brain chided. Look at her. Stronger than you...able to heal nearly any injury...if she wanted to, she could snap every bone in your body like they were straws.

Allison swallowed...then rested her head on the metal wires of the supply shelf.

"No..." she said softly. "No...she wouldn't..."

Oh please, her brain declared. You're her Renfield, hon. You're helping a monster. How long is it till you bring her someone to snack on, hmm?

The gazelle began to pant.

How long till you're teasing young men, luring them back to her lair...how long till you're watching her feed on some hot young stud...how long till you're begging for just one little taste of...

"ENOUGH!" Allison snapped, shocking herself with how loud the declaration was.

She grabbed the packages of syringes and stormed out of the supply room, a scowl on her face.

She isn't a monster...and neither am I.

...

She eased the door to the vixen's room open...and blinked in surprise.

The vixen was sipping on a bottle, her back to her.

"Get a little thirsty while I was gone?" Allison asked, easing the door shut.

"Yeah. Just needed a little water," Tara replied, turning around in the chair...

...and Allison felt a little relieved, seeing that the bottle's contents were indeed water.

"That's...a lot of syringes," Tara stated, peering at the gazelle.

Allison blinked...then looked down.

In her anger at her brain, she'd grabbed almost a dozen syringes, the packages poking up at odd angles.

Allison chuckled...then walked over to the bed, dropping the syringes.

"Yeah...I felt that you might need more than just a couple," the gazelle admitted.

Tara nodded. "Good call. So, let's get a small amount of my blood drawn so I can make slides."

Allison nodded...and gathered up one of the syringes, delicately taking it out of the packaging.

"Left or right arm?" the gazelle asked, prepping the syringe.

"Let's do left," Tara stated, rolling up her left sleeve.

The gazelle nodded, then looked up.

"Umm...I should probably sterilize this area first," Allison said.

Tara chuckled. "Really? You're worried about me getting sick?"

Allison felt herself blush...then began to feel along the vixen's arm, looking for a good vein to jab.

Then, she frowned.

"Damn...where is a vein..." she muttered.

She heard and felt the vixen sigh...then saw black paws cover her brown ones.

"Guess we go to a known spot then," the vixen said...and slowly raised her arms...

...and Allison stared, seeing the vixen place the needle of the syringe against the right side of her neck.

"Are...are you sure?" Allison asked, feeling very uneasy, a ripple shooting through her pelt.

Tara shrugged.

"Can't find a little vein, pop the biggest one there is," the vixen countered.

Allison swallowed...then tensed.

"Okay...this might hurt a bit, but I'm gonna try to be gentle," she stated...then slowly eased the needle into the vixen's jugular.

To her shock, the vixen didn't tense or flinch.

Allison slowly eased the plunger back...and stared...
...at the jet-black fluid that was slowly filling the syringe, looking more like oil than blood.

She pulled the needle out of the vixen...then stared at the syringe's contents, amazed.

"Hoo boy...that does not look good," she heard Tara say.

Allison nodded, staring at the black fluid.

"Looks...kinda like tar..." the gazelle commented.

"Yeah..." Tara replied...then reached up and plucked the syringe from the gazelle's hand.

"Now...let's see how bad things really are," the red vixen stated...

...and Allison watched as the vixen grabbed a small glass slide out from a well-used case...

...then saw the vixen squeeze out a single drop of her own blood, letting it fall onto the center of the slide, then cover it with a plastic sheet.

Allison felt amazed by how clinical and professional the vixen's work was as the vixen slid the slide under the lens of the microscope...

...then saw the vixen adjust the microscope a bit...

...then heard a soft, "Fuck..." from the vixen.

"What's wrong?" Allison asked.

The vixen sighed...then reached behind the microscope, plugging a small cable into her computer...
...and Allison stared as an image flashed on the laptop's screen.

It was an image that had mostly black, fibrous strands in it...with a few dark red specks and spots breaking up the uniformity of the black strands.

"That...is where I am at now, apparently," Tara stated, her tone a bit somber.

Allison pulled her gaze from the computer display...and looked at the vixen.

She had her muzzle resting inside folded paws...and seemed to be studying the image very intently.

"Would you guess...that there's about eighty percent contamination, Allison?" Tara asked, her voice a bit muffled.

Allison looked back at the image...and studied it intently, trying to gauge how much red there actually was.

"I think...it's closer to ninety," the gazelle stated softly...then looked back at the vixen.

The vixen's gaze had not wavered from the screen...but she gave a short nod.

"I hate to say it...but I almost agree with you," the vixen stated, then rubbed her eyes. "Shit..."

Allison felt the frustration in the vixen's voice...and rested a hand on her shoulder in sympathy.

"What now?" the gazelle asked softly.

Tara sighed again...then straightened up.

"Now...I really don't know," the vixen admitted. "I suppose I should start looking at more ways to slow this down...or how the addition of blood affects this new system...but, for right now..."

The vixen let out a soft sigh...and sank back into her chair, her ears drooping.

"...I don't know..." Tara stated softly. "Maybe check another sample...see if the results are consistent..."

Allison gently squeezed the vixen's shoulder...and felt her own ears droop.

She's losing hope...

"So...let's work on that, then," Allison stated.

She saw the vixen blink...then turn to her.

"Let's see what happens when uninfected blood is introduced into that system," the gazelle stated.

Tara looked back at the screen...and sighed.

"We can do that...maybe get a bag from the blood supply..." Tara stated. "I can talk to Doctor Michelsen...maybe get permission for a syringe-full..."

"Or..."

The vixen looked up, confusion crossing her face.

Allison sat back down on the bed, her head bowed.

"...I could donate a bit of my blood..." she went on, speaking softly.

"No."

Allison looked up, staring into the vixen's face...a face that had become very severe and aggressive.

"I am not going to take blood directly from anyone, let alone you," the vixen stated. "A live donor is out of the

question."

"But this would actually be easier than getting Doctor Michelsen to requisition some," Allison pressed. "Plus, do you REALLY want to add more suspicion and fear to the atmosphere here?"

She saw the red vixen blink.

"I mean, people avoid coming anywhere NEAR your room," Allison went on. "They don't even watch your camera...not like it..."

"Camera?" Tara asked...and Allison paused.

The vixen had a look of surprise on her face, her ears fully upright and her eyes a bit wider than normal.

Slowly, Allison nodded.

"Yeah...the nurse at the desk said...that you took apart the camera in here," Allison stated hesitantly. "Used it...for parts..."

She watched as the vixen seemed to get even more confused.

"Allison...if there's a camera in here, I didn't touch it," Tara stated. "I didn't even know there WAS a camera in here."

Allison felt a chill shoot through her body.

"I mean, I should have suspected there would be one..." Tara went on. "After all, you have to monitor the patients somehow...but..."

"...why say you dismantled it?" Allison finished, feeling a bit confused as well.

The red vixen thought for a bit...and Allison could almost see the gears turning in the vixen's head.

Then, the vixen's eyes closed...and she leaned back in her chair.

"What are you...?" Allison began, only to be cut off by the vixen raising a paw.

Several seconds went by...and the vixen did not move an inch. Did not even breathe.

"What are you doing?" Allison whispered.

"Shush," came the terse reply from the vixen, who seemed to be concentrating on something.

Several more seconds went by...then the vixen sighed and leaned forward, opening her eyes a bit.

"I can't hear it over your heartbeat," Tara admitted...then looked at the gazelle.

Allison blushed, looking away a bit.

"Do you know where the camera is?" Tara asked.

The gazelle shook her head, silently.

She heard the vixen sigh...then looked back at Tara.

The vixen had her muzzle resting on top of her folded black paws...and again had a very intense, thoughtful look on her face.

"We need to find out where that camera is," the vixen stated...then looked at Allison. "And maybe get a clue as to who is seeing that feed as well."

"Well...Doctor Michelsen would be the most logical person," Allison commented.

Slowly, Tara nodded. "True...but I think that maybe..."

She looked up...and Allison saw a determined look in the vixen's eyes.

"...I think someone else might be getting the feed for themselves," the vixen finished.

"But who...and why?" Allison asked.

The red vixen shrugged.

"I don't know...but we need to start somewhere," the red vixen said...then turned the chair to face the gazelle.

"And I think...I know how to start..." the red vixen stated, an impish smile crossing the vixen's muzzle.

...

Nickie felt an ear twitch as she continued to read her magazine, the article detailing a new weight-loss plan.

The calico chuckled...then felt a presence near her.

She glanced up...then did a double take.

Standing on the other side of the counter, clad in white hospital scrubs...was a red and white furred vixen with piercing green eyes.

Green eyes that were staring at her.

Boring a hole into her.

Nickie swallowed, a bit nervous under that intense gaze.

"Tara..."

The calico's eyes went wide. *Shit! That's the fucking VAMPIRE! What is she doing out?*

"Stop scaring Nickie," a feminine voice stated. "The bathroom is just around the corner."

Nickie glanced over her right shoulder...and spotted the lean gazelle who was the vampire's keeper standing not far from her, a slight smile on the face of her fellow nurse.

"Do you need me to show you where the bathroom

is, Tara?" the gazelle asked.

The calico's gaze swung back to the red vixen.

The vixen had not moved a single inch...

...then, very slowly...far too slowly for the calico's comfort...it slipped around the corner of the counter.

Nickie heard a door creak open...then the soft thud of the door closing again...

...and exhaled, genuinely relieved.

"What the fuck are you doing, letting THAT thing out of her room?" the calico asked, whirling around.

The gazelle simply shrugged, entering the station.

"She needed to use the bathroom," the gazelle stated.

"Since the closest one is near the station, I felt it was a good idea to let her use that one."

Nickie watched as the gazelle started looking at the row of monitors in back of the nurse's station...then let out a huff of air.

"Y'ask me...that thing needs to be locked up permanently," the calico grouched.

...

Allison felt herself frown at the calico's words.

"Why? Because she believes she was bitten by a vampire?" she asked, glancing back over her shoulder.

The calico let out a huff of air.

"Exactly," Nickie stated...then turned around a bit to look at her. "She's a dangerous freak."

Allison watched...as the calico swiveled back in her chair, peeking over the counter.

"I'd rather deal with some schizophrenic who's gone

off his meds than that...thing," Nickie grouched.

Allison turned back to the small wall of monitors...
...then quickly tapped the "On" button under the dark monitor.

An image flared to life on the screen, with a soft "Fwish" sound...

...and Allison tensed, holding her breath...then glancing up at the monitor above the once-dark one.

The calico's reflection did not move. She was still peeking over the counter.

Allison let out the breath she was holding slowly...then glanced back down at the monitor.

The image it showed was that of the vixen's room...but with a clear view of the desk and the laptop, the screen very visible...as was the vixen's bed.

That looks like...the corner across from the door, Allison noted...then turned off the monitor, returning it to its normally dark state.

She turned around...and forced herself to suppress a smile...

...as Nickie slithered back into her seat, easing it away from the desk...

...and the red vixen padded back into view, stopping to lock eyes with the calico.

Allison raised her hands to her muzzle...to hide a very wide smile.

She's really playing this up, Allison thought, the impishness sending a bit of gleeful warmth through her body.

"All done?" Allison asked after lowering her hands.

The red vixen nodded a bit, staying ominously silent the whole time...her gaze never leaving that of the calico's, who emitted a soft mewl of discomfort.

Allison smiled...as she stepped out of the nurse's station to meet the vixen as she walked around the counter, her gaze locked onto the calico the entire way...

...then gently escorted the red vixen back into her room, closing the door behind her...

...and finally letting out the laughs she was barely holding in.

"Oh my God...you should've seen her face when you left," Allison giggled.

The red vixen padded over to the chair...and sank down in it, a sly smile on her muzzle.

"Did you find out where the camera is?" the vixen asked.

Allison wiped a tear from her eye, still very happy with the calico's reaction.

She nodded. "The corner across from the door. Pretty high up," Allison stated, then began to come down from her perch. "Has a clear view of your desk and bed...including the laptop's screen."

She looked up...and saw the vixen sigh, her red-furred form sinking back in the chair.

"So...that means our suspect or suspects likely have been able to see everything I've done," Tara commented. "All the tests I've done...all the sites I've gone to..."

Allison felt a touch of apprehension...as the vixen leaned forward, her head in her paws.

"They know almost everything..." the vixen stated.
Allison felt herself frown.

"And that is very bad, right?" the gazelle asked.
Tara nodded slightly.

"Could be...if our suspect is the person I think it is,"
the red vixen stated.

Allison sat down on the bed, leaning forward, closer
to the vixen.

"Who?" Allison asked.

The vixen sighed...then leaned back in the chair.

"That wolf," she commented. "His scent is all over
that station...some scents fresh, some very old."

Allison watched...as the red vixen turned slightly to
look at her.

"I think...that he might be keeping tabs on me," the
vixen stated.

"Wait...he's one of the senior nurses here," Allison
countered. "That would explain why he's around the nurse's
station so much, why his scent is there so much..."

"Does it explain why his scent is also all over my
door?" Tara asked.

Allison fell silent.

"His scent is all over my door...the only scent that is
on that door," Tara commented. "Window, body...it's all
OVER my door..."

She watched...as the vixen shuddered a bit.

"So...he's been watching you..." Allison commented.
"Why?"

Tara's face became very thoughtful...and this time,

Allison DID see the gears turning in the vixen's head.

"Well...what do you know about him?" Tara asked, the vixen's facial fur furrowing a bit.

Allison felt her own facial fur crinkle a bit as she thought.

What DO I know about him? Allison asked herself.

"Aside from the fact that he's blaming you for what happened to that orderly...not a whole lot," Allison stated.

"Oh...and he got really somber when he spotted your file too."

She watched as the vixen's left ear twitched.

"Somber?"

Slowly, the gazelle nodded.

"Maybe...more like angry, but a calm anger," she added.

She watched...as the vixen processed that information...then sighed.

"He's still the most likely suspect," the vixen concluded. "Granted, Doctor Michelsen likely gets the video feed as well...but still..."

"I think you want it to be him, Tara," Allison commented.

She felt the vixen's gaze lock onto her...and felt a touch of annoyance in that gaze.

"I think that you want it to be him...to justify that feeling you got off of him," Allison concluded.

Tara stared intently at her for several seconds...
...then amazed her...by nodding.

"That is a possibility too," the vixen admitted. "But, it is still a theory."

Allison nodded...then sighed.

"So...I'll do some poking around...see what I can find out," Allison stated.

"Nothing too risky," Tara added. "And nothing to tip our hand either."

Allison blinked...as the vixen leaned in close.

"We need to pretend like we don't know anything about the camera," Tara whispered. "Go on like everything is normal."

Slowly, Allison nodded...then smiled.

"So...what about your blood sample?" Allison asked, leaning back.

Tara shook her head...then picked up the syringe that still held her blood in it.

"Not today," the vixen said...

...then Allison stared...as the vixen emptied the syringe into her muzzle, in full view of the camera.

The vixen shuddered, shaking her head.

"Gah!" Tara declared. "Man, my blood tastes terrible!"

Allison let out a soft chuckle, seeing the vixen lick her muzzle, trying to get the taste out of it...

...then fell silent, her expression losing some of its mirth.

If her own blood tastes that bad...

"...maybe that is why..." Allison began.

Tara looked up, a bit confused.

"You said food had been tasting bland to you, right?" Allison asked.

Slowly, the vixen nodded.

"And your own blood tastes horrible," the gazelle went on.

Again, the vixen slowly nodded.

"So...maybe, part of the reason why vampires drink blood...is because it tastes better than anything else they would normally drink?" Allison finished, looking at the vixen.

Tara thought for a bit...then shrugged.

"Possible. I can't really think of any better explanation at present...not without seeing how my blood reacts to fresh blood," the vixen stated...then stared at her. "And no, I don't plan on getting any samples anytime soon either...not until..."

"Not until we figure out who is doing the spying," Allison assented.

Tara nodded...then sighed...

...and turned around in her chair.

Allison watched...as the vixen delicately put the slide away in the well-worn black slide box...then made a few clicks on the mouse for her laptop...then shut that down.

"I think...I've had enough excitement for a little while," the vixen said, softly, her ears drooping.

Allison got off of the bed. "Did you want me to...tuck you in?"

Tara shook her head...then eased herself out of the chair.

"I think I'm going to meditate for a little while," the vixen stated, padding to the center of the room.

Allison watched as the vixen sat down, folding her

legs under her in a lotus position...then letting out a deep breath.

"Make sure you lock the door when you leave," Tara stated softly, her voice barely reaching the gazelle's ears.

Allison nodded mutely...then walked toward the door...

...and glanced back.

The vixen was sitting on the floor, unmoving...as still as a headstone.

Then, Allison looked up...

...at the navy blue blackout blinds, keeping the sunlight away from the vixen as she sat there.

Risky...very risky for her...

Allison sighed...then opened the door and slipped out.

Focus girl...she knows what she's doing.

Allison slipped each key into its lock, securing the door.

Now, you need to do your job.

The gazelle nodded...and gripped the keyring tight in a hand...

...then turned and walked back to the nurse's station.

...

(later that day...approximately 6 pm)

...

Corey took a small bite of the barely-warm chicken sandwich...and frowned.

Damn microwave...never fucking works properly.

The wolf chewed the bite a few times...then

swallowed...

...as a familiar female calico slid into a chair across from him.

"Nickie," he stated calmly.

The calico didn't reply...so he glanced up.

Nickie looked a bit shaken...and was glancing around nervously.

"What's wrong?" Corey asked, setting down the sandwich, his ears going forward.

Nickie leaned over the table a bit.

"She let that fucking thing OUT today," the calico whispered.

Corey's eyes narrowed.

"Where?" he asked brusquely.

"Just to the bathroom near the nurse's station..."

Nickie replied, resting her coat and purse on the table...a faint muffled thump emanating from underneath the clothing.

"She shouldn't be let out at all," Corey grumbled.

Nickie nodded...then shuddered.

"I know. Fucking monster," the calico mewled, shaking a bit. "She just stared at me with those eyes of hers...made my skin crawl."

Corey frowned, leaning forward...and slipping a paw under Nickie's jacket...

...a bit relieved to find the all-too-familiar videocassette there.

"You didn't meet her gaze, did you?" the wolf asked...slowly sliding the videocassette into his lap.

"Umm..." Nickie replied...then scratched at an ear.

Corey sighed.

"Well, she wasn't even supposed to be OUT, Corey," Nickie mewled. "And she was so freaking silent..."

"That is what they DO, Nickie," Corey hissed quietly. "They're like stoats...they use their gaze to charm their prey...lull them into lowering their guard...then they pounce."

Nickie shuddered again, the calico's fur bristling.

"Fucking freaky, is what she is," the calico mewled...then sighed. "Well, she's Allison's problem, not mine...thank God."

Corey leaned back.

"God had nothing to do with that monster being put here, Nickie," the wolf stated coldly.

The calico got out of the seat and gathered her belongings.

"I'll keep slipping you her recordings," Nickie stated, slipping away.

The wolf nodded absently...then patted the videocassette in his lap.

"And it will be put to good use," the wolf stated calmly.

...

Allison moved away from the lunchroom window, a frown crossing her muzzle.

So...Corey and Nickie are working together...and she's apparently supplying him with Tara's footage, the gazelle thought, adjusting her purse as she walked away from the door.

That means...Tara might be right...

She walked down toward the nurse's station...and blinked.

The nurse's station was occupied by a slender, black-furred doberman, one who seemed much less hyperactive than the last time she saw the canine.

"You get the short straw, Terry?" the gazelle asked, smiling.

The doberman looked up, then chuckled.

"Yeah, I guess," Terry replied. "I don't mind it though...usually pretty quiet here at night." He turned around in the chair to look at her. "How are you doing, Allison?"

"Pretty good," the gazelle replied...then glanced at the monitor wall...

...and blinked, puzzled.

Tara's monitor was active, showing the vixen sitting in the exact same spot she was in hours ago when the gazelle left.

"Huh...that's weird," Allison mused out loud.

"What is?" Terry asked.

She pointed at the monitor with the red vixen on it.

"Nickie said that the camera in Miss Bastille's room was broken," the gazelle commented. "That monitor's always dark when she works."

Terry frowned, an ear twitching slightly.

"No...her camera's working fine," the doberman stated. "They get checked every month, broken ones get replaced pretty quickly here."

The doberman flashed a smile.

"After all, we gotta keep an eye on the patients, right?" he asked, chuckling a bit.

Allison let out a soft chuckle as well...then reached for the keyring.

"I'm going to peek in on my patient before I head out for the night, okay?" the gazelle asked.

Terry nodded. "Sure. Hey, wait..."

Allison looked...as the doberman leaned forward a bit.

"Is she doing okay?" the doberman asked.

Allison thought for a bit.

"Well, she has a lot of issues that she needs to sort through..." Allison stated. "It's just going to take quite a bit of time, Terry."

The doberman nodded. "Yeah. Be nice to see someone get out of here...at least, by getting better...not..."

Allison saw the doberman's usually jovial manner fade a bit.

"Let's just say...there's a reason Saint Mariah's is called "The Last Hope Hotel"," the doberman stated soberly.

Allison frowned. "None of the patients here get better?"

The doberman stared at her...and she saw years of frustration in the doberman's gaze.

"Not a one," he commented. "We haven't had a patient cured here in...well, since before I came here four years ago."

Allison sighed.

"How does this place stay open then?" the gazelle

asked.

Terry rubbed his eyes.

"Basically, we're a dumping ground," the doberman stated. "We get those patients other hospitals don't want to take in. The lost causes, so to speak."

Terry looked up at the rows of monitors...then nodded to her.

"I think, out of everyone here...your fox has the best shot of getting out of here," he stated.

Allison shrugged. "I hope so," the gazelle replied, then turned away.

Looks like Terry's not involved, Allison thought, walking to the vixen's door and slipping the keys into their respective locks...then slipping inside.

The vixen had not moved an inch from where she was when the gazelle left, hours ago.

Allison let out a soft cough, clearing her throat.

"Bit late for you to be here, Allison," the vixen stated softly, her voice rough from disuse.

Allison nodded...then walked in front of the vixen...and sat down, trying to get as comfortable as possible.

"It looks like you were right about Corey," Allison stated.

She glanced up...and saw that the vixen's eyes were now open, looking at her.

"How so?" Tara asked softly.

"I saw Nickie supply him the tape," Allison commented. "And I was also at the nurse's station...seems Nickie lied about your camera being broken too."

Slowly, Tara nodded...and let out a breath, creating little dust whirls in the air.

"Terry...the night-nurse...says the cameras are serviced every month," the gazelle went on. "And your monitor was on when I was there." She leaned forward a bit. "Nickie always keeps your monitor off when she watches the station."

"You saw her reaction to me," Tara commented.

"I also saw her supply Corey with the video tape," Allison commented.

Slowly, Tara nodded...then smiled.

"I'll spend the rest of the night thinking about this...and I'll have a plan for how we should proceed by morning," Tara said calmly...then looked up, flashing a wan smile. "Thank you."

Allison nodded...then eased herself up, stretching her legs a bit.

"How do you sit there for hours?" the gazelle groused.

Tara chuckled softly. "I don't feel the effects as much."

Allison walked to the door, gingerly.

"Allison?"

The gazelle looked back, her hand on the door-handle.

"Be careful," the vixen stated. "We have no idea what exactly we're dealing with here."

The gazelle nodded...then slipped out of the room locking the door behind her.

...

Doctor Michelsen sighed, rewinding the footage again...then picked up the tape recorder.

"Doctor Michelsen report on patient T Bastille, 3rd August, 2014," he stated calmly. "Patient has enlisted nurse A Cousins in her experiments...seems to have formed a relationship with Nurse Cousins...does not seem to be impairing her research..."

The grey coyote removed his glasses...then sighed again.

"This research could help save this hospital from closure, if marketed properly," he went on. "But it appears Miss Bastille is highly reluctant to proceed to live tests."

The coyote frowned a bit, watching the footage of the blood draw.

"Miss Bastille's research is astonishing...with so many possible applications..." he mused...then thumbed the recorder off.

He folded his paws under his muzzle...and looked at the footage again.

"So many possible applications...if only she could be motivated..." Doctor Michelsen stated.

...

Corey studied the recording deeply, watching as the figures on the monitor moved about, studying everything that was transpiring.

He watched as the two figures talked and moved about the room...then spotted something different.

He thumbed the play button, causing the video to

return to normal speed...and watched...

...as the gazelle on the screen opened a bag containing a syringe in it...then attempted to find a vein on the red vixen.

The wolf watched...as the vixen moved the gazelle's hands up toward her neck...

...and he tensed as the gazelle inserted the needle into the vixen's neck, pulling out a blackish fluid.

Corey paused the video...then turned to a laptop computer near the monitor...

...and saw the same image on the screen.

He access his video editing software...and enhanced the area around the fluid...

...and scowled.

"That isn't blood," he stated softly.

He studied the image intently...then made a snapshot of it, saving it to his computer...

...then he went back to the television monitor and hit play again.

The wolf studied the scenes playing out on the monitor...the vixen prepping the slide...examining it...

...then he hit pause again, freezing an image on the screen again...an image showing the vixen's laptop screen fairly clearly.

Corey turned back to the computer monitor...and went ahead and enhanced that image...

...and his eyes went wide, the contents of the vixen's laptop screen revealed to him.

He saw a screen filled with jet-black fibers...with

small dots of red inside it, dots that looked almost like...

"...that is what her blood looks like..." Corey breathed, softly.

He shuddered...then saved the image to his computer...and closed his video editing software, revealing his e-mail program.

Slowly, Corey began typing.

"Report on the vampire at Saint Mariah's," the e-mail's subject line read.

"Attached are two recent images from surveillance of the victim of the vampire attack. Please advise on what to do next," he typed...then closed the letter with a simple "C".

He dragged the two pictures to the e-mail...then hit "send"...

...and exhaled deeply.

She is likely lost, he thought. Another soul lost to this plague.

"P-Ding!"

The wolf shot upright, surprised by the rapid reply.

Slowly, the wolf opened the e-mail response, titled "Re: Report..."

Corey watched as the e-mail loaded.

"Secure vampire's research if possible. Continue surveillance. Update us if the vampire becomes aggressive," was the reply, closed with a "L"

Corey swallowed, his fur rippling.

Then, he bowed his head.

"Almighty God...give me the strength to do this task," he prayed...then crossed his chest. "Amen."

...