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#### Ruins of a Past Day: Bloodlust 1

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#### **Foreword**

This story is a continuation of the saga of Valerie, Roland, and Elektra as originally appearing in *Casting Call for Love*. This tale, however, focuses more on Elektra than the others. You don't need to read *Casting Call for Love* before you read this book. Details from that novel may make this story even more enjoyable for some readers, however.

This is *not* a historical novel. I've sacrificed some historical facts for both flow and clarity of the story. Careful readers will see words used in 1301 even though they didn't come into common usage until the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Give me a break!

As with all fiction that involves an element of paranormal, fantasy, futurism, or any of a number of other facets, just suspend your disbelief and plunge into the world of past, present, vampires, and passion.

Keep Loving!

Melodee Aaron

January 2008

Guatay, California

## Scotland, Present Day

Looking through eyes not totally her own, Elektra sighed as she took in the scene. More than seven hundred years had passed since she last saw this place. Now, her essence shared the body of this pretty woman, and she again looked over the ramparts of McGill Keep. Elektra didn't think the other even knew of her presence. Since attaching her mind to the body of this woman, Elektra had led a double life. The woman had to maintain her function, or others would find Elektra lurking inside. That wasn't totally correct, and she knew it. The treatments made it seem that way, and the illusion was good enough. So, here she was, back at McGill Keep, overlooking the setting of one of Markinson's books. The entire production crew and some of the cast had made the trip from Los Angeles to Scotland to get the feel of the place.

Elektra could sum that up in three words—love, passion, and death.

The castle lay in ruins now. Walls and ramparts, ancient when last she was here, now spilled in crumbling heaps on the hillside. Grass and vines intertwined like serpents through the rubble, although the stony ground gave only a moderate foothold for the foliage.

The roll of distant thunder, more felt in the viscera than heard with the ears, pulled her attention to the billowing storm clouds meandering across the low hills. Their blackness fit her mood just fine. The memories of four thousand years of life as a predator tried to overwhelm her, but she managed to push them down. The last time she was here, her battle against that fate, and history, had been in full swing.

\* \* \* :

## Scotland, 1301

People in the village knew little about McGill. He had appeared one day with a load of riches and had taken over the old castle. For the first time in living memory, the village had a lord.

Duncan leaned on his hoe and wiped the sweat running from his sandy-red hair and down his brow with the back of his bulging arm. He watched the keep as if it would tell him something of its occupant, but the cold stone said nothing to him from its perfect position on the hill. Just high enough to command the valley below, but low enough to take shelter from the frequent storms that swept over the highlands.

Villagers saw McGill only rarely, only when he personally dealt with a tenant who was late on their taxes. Usually, his minions handled such matters. This was a good thing. Several villagers who had had direct contact with McGill seemed to vanish. The old women whispered about how McGill would kill them, drink their blood, and use the skins of farmers to make a new saddle for his towering, snorting black stallion.

He chuckled to himself over the foolishness of old women as he turned back to the field he needed to finish before sundown.

"Ho! Duncan! Duncan Campbell!"

Duncan sighed to himself. So much for getting done in the field early today, he thought. He turned toward the voice calling his name.

"Ho, Gilroy." Gilroy McBarens was regarded by most villagers to be someplace on the social ladder between the town drunk and the village idiot. Duncan knew Gilroy resided much closer to the former.

"Hae ye heard, Duncan?"

"Heard what?"

"Why, the news!" Gilroy looked around as if someone were watching him. "McGill is taking a bride."

"Means naught to me."

Gilroy rolled his eyes. "It should, ye dunderhead. Often, when the lord takes a woman, it bodes well for the clans."

"Why would it? Will the man be too busy fucking to pay heed to his keep?"

"Well, no, but with a wee lassie in his bed, he'll be a sight more civil."

"You're a dreamer, Gilroy." Duncan clapped his scrawny friend on a bony shoulder with a well-muscled hand. "A simpleminded drunken dreamer."

"Aye, maybe I am." He smiled, great dark gaps showing between his dirty teeth. "Will ye be coming to the pub later? Some o' The Bruce's men will be there."

"The English will skin the lot of ye one day." He glanced up at the sun. "Aye, I'll be there. If ye leave me to finish my work."

\* \* \* \*

## Scotland, Present Day

Valerie jumped when Roland touched her arm. A small frown flitted over his face. "What's wrong, baby?"

Perhaps it was the cold wind leading the coming storm that made her shiver a little. She managed a smile. "Nothing at all. I was just thinking how beautiful this place must have been seven hundred years ago."

"Yeah, I can only imagine." Roland slipped his arm around her waist. Even after more than a year of marriage, his heat against her body made her heart race. He nodded toward where Stanley Markinson stood leaning casually against a section of crumbling wall some fifty yards away. "I think he can see it back then."

Was Markinson watching the approaching storm, them, or just her? She pulled her gaze from the novelist's eyes. "Yes, maybe he can."

Roland hesitated a moment. "Are you having those crazy thoughts again?"

"I guess that's one word for them." For nearly a year now, she'd had the feeling that she wasn't alone. Not that someone was watching her or was with her, but in the sense that someone was *in* her. Sometimes, she had thoughts that seemed to come from another person, another brain.

The events had frightened her enough at first that she did some research, but not too much. As was always the case, a little knowledge was a dangerous thing. She had convinced herself she had either schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder.

One nice thing about being Mrs. Roland Westwood was that she could not only afford the best psychiatrists money could buy, but she could also get in to see them in a day. And they made house calls for her.

After a huge battery of psychological tests and about sixty hours of talking, the headshrinkers had decided that she suffered from stress and nothing more. They assured her that at twenty-eight years old, showing symptoms of schizophrenia would be very rare. They produced articles to show her that real multiple personality disorder was even rarer.

So, she took the anxiolytic medicines and bided her time. It got better. She still sometimes had the idea that someone was watching her every move, and she also believed that sometimes she did things she couldn't remember. But it was better. She didn't have the feelings every waking moment now. She could focus on her life and the great man she'd literally stumbled on more than a year ago. Valerie turned in Roland's arms to face him. "Not really. At least no more than normally." She stretched up to kiss him.

He pulled away from her lips. "Just tell me if starts again, OK?"

"I will." She put on her best pout. "Now, shut up and kiss me."

As Roland pressed his lips to hers, he turned slightly. Valerie opened her eyes and looked across the battlement.

Stanley Markinson stood watching them.

\* \* \* :

## Scotland, 1301

Melissa watched the rolling green hills slide past the coach window as she rode to whatever fate had brought her to now. Sometimes a small farm broke through the landscape, a few patches of green crops jutting through the rocks and grass where some family tried to scrabble a living from the dirt. All her father would tell her of the man whom she was to marry was his name: Angus McGill. That and he lived in some Godforsaken corner of Scotland. At least he had his own castle and keep.

Her father, that's what he liked to call himself, said McGill would be a good man for her to marry. He had connections with Robert Bruce's men, but McGill sold his services to the highest bidder like a farmer hawking cabbages in the marketplace. He didn't care about politics, only money.

And women.

Melissa had little choice in the matter. Short of revealing herself or just vanishing, she had to go through with the farce of a wedding. She'd been in this role for only a couple of years, and she had no desire to start over again so soon.

As the adopted daughter of a powerful English earl, she had position and privilege, something she'd missed for the last few thousand years. At least she had it until her father decided to marry her off to some scruffy Scot for political gain.

A fine future for Melissa Crommann, she thought, laughing to herself just a little.

The idea of living a lie didn't bother her, not anymore. There had been a time some thousands of years ago that it did. All that bothered her now was people calling her *Melissa* instead of her real name.

Then again, these simpletons would burn her alive if they knew the truth. Not that it would kill her. It would just hurt.

At least it would hurt until the change took her.

\* \* \* :

Duncan sat sipping his ale as he watched the rest of the pub patrons and thought about the things he had heard this night. William Wallace himself had been there earlier, and the big man had spoken of freedom and crushing the English. In fact, he spoke of these things with a fanaticism that Duncan found a little frightening.

The speech carried a tone of finality, like Wallace somehow knew the future, and it frightened him. Or maybe it was just one possible future. The future Wallace seemed to know, and the one Duncan thought he could see hints of, involved English soldiers, bloodshed, and servitude for Scotland.

But Wallace was a master of oratory. Despite his appearance of being just a farmer, he had held the pub patrons in the palm of his hand. Despite the look of fear Duncan thought he had seen in Wallace's eyes, the man talked a good game.

He had whipped the small crowd into a furor. Over and over, the men in pub had screamed out the word *freedom* in response to Wallace's cries for sovereignty from the Crown. Almost to a man, everyone in the pub had been ready to take on the English single-handed with nothing more than a pocket of rocks.

Almost.

Duncan knew better. He'd seen fanatics before. His father had been one. The English had left him strung up in the tree in front of the family home for him and his mother to watch as the crows picked at his rotting flesh and the sun bleached his bones.

There was more than one type of fanatic, too. He looked over to where Gilroy lay passed out from drinking, his hand up the skirt of the bar wench who had serviced seven men that night, and those were only the ones Duncan had seen her flat-backed on the tables for. She was a fanatic for the coin it brought her. Just as Gilroy was a fanatic about his drink. They were just as fanatical as Wallace and Bruce.

Duncan took a long swallow to empty his mug and stood from his small table at the rear of the pub. As he made his way to the door, he tossed a few coins into the lap of the sleeping wench. One bounced off her exposed breast. He nodded goodnight to the barman and stepped out into the warm night air.

The full moon shown wetly on the moor at the far end of the valley, and mist hung in the air like a shroud. The scene fit his dark, reflective mood just fine.

He, too, was a fanatic, and Duncan knew it full well. His personal fanaticism was his search for a woman. The village had precious few available women to start with, and none who he thought worthy were interested in marrying a poor hard-dirt farmer.

Duncan really couldn't blame them, though. What did he have to offer a woman other than decades of poverty raising children? Still, his fanatical streak made him look, and hope, despite the odds.

At least his fanaticism wouldn't get him killed.

\* \* \* \*

Melissa tossed restlessly in her tent as the dreams came to her mind. Her contacts within her kind living in a faraway land called it the Dream Time. She called them nightmares.

In the dreams, she could see many vague things, but none sharp enough to make much sense. She saw mortals going about their daily affairs. She saw her kind also going about their business, but it was a very different nature than the human activity. She could see two men, one mortal, locked in some conflict or another.

And Melissa saw blood, buckets of blood, splashed across the ground and a stone wall.

To have dreams of precognition wasn't unusual for her kind, but she lacked the training needed to master the dreams. Melissa couldn't focus the swarming images into a coherent story. She'd spent too much of the last three thousand years running from who, and what, she was.

She bolted upright when she woke. Sweat poured from her face and her breath raced. When she raised her hand to wipe the wetness from her brow, she could see the glistening perspiration on her arm in the soft flickering of the candlelight. As she tried to calm herself, she was thankful that she would arrive at her destination on the morrow around midday.

She'd gone four days without feeding, and she was nearing her limits. She'd eaten the mortal's food, but it hadn't provided the nourishment she needed. Feeding now would be a huge risk with the three score of soldiers and two knights accompanying her to her new husband.

Once in her new home, to steal away and find a farm animal to feed on would be a simple matter. While not the ideal food, that would get her through until she could learn the ways of her new fieldom and how best to get what she really needed.

To distract her mind from the hunger in her body, she thought about starting yet another new life with yet another new man. She'd lost count of how many husbands she'd had over the last thirty centuries. She thought the number someplace around seventy. The enchantments she could place on mortal men concealed that she aged slower, if at all, than they. One of the many tools in her predator's collection also gave her the ability, to some degree, to make herself appear older to mortals.

And now she was on her way to yet another man and yet another marriage.

It didn't matter, though. In a few years, maybe fifty or so, he too would be a moldering corpse, and she would move on to yet another life to hide from the mortals.

\* \* \* \*

# Scotland, Present Day

Roland's attention kept drifting away from the conversation. He watched Valerie as she wandered about on the property of the old castle. Something worried him, but he couldn't put his finger on it yet.

"RW? Are you OK?"

Roland turned to Jim Alba, his senior director. "Yeah, sorry." He nodded toward Valerie. "I'm just a little worried about her."

"What's up?"

"Just the same things, really. I think she's hiding that the voices, or whatever it is, are back."

Jim nodded as he took a drag from his cigar. At least since Roland made him the senior director at Midnight Interludes, Jim had started buying good cigars. "Maybe she is, maybe not." He tried to blow a few smoke rings, but the breeze whipped them into oblivion almost before the smoke left his mouth. "She'll tell you if something is wrong." He chuckled a bit. "That whole thing between you two about always being open and honest. Sweet, romantic, and just a little bit dumb."

Roland couldn't help laughing. "Maybe, but that's what we do."

Stanley Markinson walked up to where they stood near the edge of one of the crumbling ramparts. Roland thought Markinson a strange bird. Part of it came from the fact that he was a man writing romance novels, a profession traditionally dominated by women. Part of it came from the fact that the man seemed just a bit odd.

Markinson wasn't a big man, the top of his head only reaching Roland's chin. His hair was a sort of mousey brown, and he was balding in a few areas. Roland thought the novelist's most striking features were his dark steel grey eyes, but Roland never heard a woman call Markinson attractive, not even those strange eyes. When Markinson looked at him, Roland believed the man could see even his deepest, darkest secrets as clearly as if they were written out.

Since he met Markinson during the negotiations to buy the movie rights for his *Bloodlust* series of erotic romance novels, Roland had tried to pin down what was actually strange about the man. The best he could come up with was that Stanley Markinson was old, much older than the fifty-five or so years he looked.

Maybe, Roland thought, he has an old soul. That's what Valerie always said, but it was clear she didn't like Markinson.

Roland wondered about that, too. Valerie liked everyone. Sometimes she liked people too much and missed the fact that they weren't all that good of people. But she just didn't like Markinson.

Markinson was likeable. He had an old world charm, like that refined by the aristocracy of Europe for the last fifteen centuries. He spoke with a slight accent, but Roland couldn't place it. Maybe English with hints of German?

Markinson smiled slightly. "What do you think of my setting for this chapter of Bloodlust?"

Jim snubbed out his cigar. Markinson hated smoke. "It's a gorgeous place, but we're going to have a hell of a time getting the feeling of age through the camera."

"Yes, this is an ancient place." Markinson watched the clouds for a moment. "The rains will come soon. Not hard, mind you, but a gentle rain lasting perhaps thirty minutes, then the sun will return." He faced Roland squarely. "It has been doing that here for more than two thousand years."

The hard steel of the gaze seemed to pin him in place, like a bug to a collector's specimen board. Roland struggled against the bond in his mind for a moment before breaking free. He had no idea what to say. "How did you ever pick this particular place as a setting, Stanley?"

"Oh, that was easy. You see, my family once lived here."

"Really? So this is your family estate?"

Markinson laughed softly. "No, not any longer. We ended up on the wrong side of the English."

"Sounds like family politics is a lot like the movie business. Piss off the wrong people, and you're out."

"Perhaps it is, yes." Markinson sighed heavily. "In any event, what does the rest of the crew and the cast have to say so far?"

Jim looked longingly at the cigar butt on the ground for a moment. "Everyone loves the place. We can't get over the feeling of history here."

"There is a great deal of history here." A sudden smile split Markinson's face. "Perhaps even Elektra will become a part of that history." A gentle chuckle escaped his lips before he walked away.

# Scotland, 1301

Again, Melissa looked out the carriage window at the passing countryside, but this would be the last time for this trip. She and her entourage would reach the castle of her new husband very soon now.

For the last quarter-hour, she'd been able to see the castle in the distance. Sitting near the vertex of a low hill, she knew from past experiences that the castle would be easy to defend by covering the very pinnacle of the mound with just a few soldiers. The position also would shield the castle from the weather.

Despite the military propensity of the castle, it looked dark and foreboding from this distance. Age hung on the grey stone walls like moss hanging from the trees near a swamp. Even with the mists of the morning long since scattered by the warmth of the sun, the keep had a look that would frighten most mortals.

Melissa felt no such fear. She had lived in far worse places. Some had been dank and dark. Other places had been hot and sweltering. A few had been nice, by mortal standards. Most had been less so. It made no difference to her. As long as she could feed and the mortals left her alone, it didn't matter.

As they neared the castle, the small farms along the rough road became more numerous. Soon, the caravan entered the village itself. As far as she and her escorts knew, the village had no real name. The simple name of McGill's Keep would do.

The village was hardly up to the standards England had set. Small, dirty, and dusty, the village was little more than a few houses and businesses clustered together and a little grimy pub tucked in between two shops. Filthy men and women stopped what they were doing to stare at the royal coach and the armed men surrounding it as they made their way through town. Even dirtier children ran behind, laughing and screaming despite the marks of the pox on their skin.

Between the village and the castle lay more farmland. As they passed one well-kept farm, Melissa noticed two men standing in the field. The men could not have been more different

One man was small and scrawny, looking much like a scarecrow standing in the field. His arms and legs had a spindly look, and his clothes ill fit him. His wild shock of silver hair exploded from his head like the rockets and fireworks she'd seen in the Far East. Dirt crusted his face and all of his exposed skin.

The other man clearly was a peasant as well, but that's where the similarities ended. His clothes, while coarse and primitive, were clean and fit his body well. Although some dirt from his labors mussed his hands and arms, the tanned skin of his face looked like he had wiped the soil and sweat from it recently. The man had his light red hair pulled back and tied behind his head, and in spite of his toils, it looked clean as well. As he leaned on his hoe, his huge arms flexed, and Melissa could see the hard muscles flexing under the tanned skin.

"Driver, stop the carriage." She couldn't help herself. Melissa wanted a better look at these two men who would soon be under her charge. Her stranger-fiancé might not have known it yet, but she planned to take an active role in governing the keep.

The carriage came to a clattering halt on the stone road, and the knight who was in charge rode up to speak to her. "My lady, we shouldn't stop here."

"Mind your duties, Sir George, and I'll mind mine."

The man appeared as if he was about to speak again, but the look in her eye must have deterred him. She felt the predator's skills coming to her now, her ears picking up sounds far too faint for mortal ears. The scents of the two men wafted across the field to fill her nose. She knew her eyes had also taken on a little of the green and red tint as the irises became more catlike as her vision sharpened and she saw the hints of color in the aura of living creatures.

Sir George's horse whinnied and started, staggering backward from the instinctive perception of a predatory threat. Despite the horse dancing and rearing and its hooves lifting several inches from the dusty road, the knight held tight to the reins and spoke softly to his steed until the horse calmed. As if also sensing an unseen threat, his voice came soft, almost like a whisper when he looked at her. "Yes, my lady." He rode away.

As she watched the men in field, her brain sorted through the flood of information hitting her senses. Soon, she isolated the smell of the big, redheaded farmer. He smelled of sweat, yes, but it was clean sweat born of honest, hard work. He leaned casually on his hoe and watched her. With vision far superior to that of a mortal, even passing that sported by hawks searching for mice from high in the sky, she could see his hazel eyes calmly searching her from across the distance. The images were distorted by her heat vision, though, and she saw the calm blue color of the warm aura surrounding him. The man radiated only curiosity with no hint of fear.

The scarecrow of a man, however, reeked of fear. Its stench filled her nose and mind, threatening to trigger the change in her.

Melissa pulled her head back inside the coach. "Driver, move on."

Her heart pounded in her chest like a drum calling cadence for some vast army, and her breath roared through her throat as the carriage began to move toward her future.

\* \* \*

"Look, Duncan! She comes now!"

Duncan looked up from the clump of weeds he worried with the hoe. Gilroy shook with excitement as he pointed toward the road, and Duncan saw a small caravan moving from the village toward the castle. There were several wagons with colored cloth concealing lumps and bumps of varying shapes and sizes. Many soldiers, both on horseback and foot, moved along with the procession. Duncan thought two of the horsemen to be knights because they wore English-style armor. And then there was the carriage.

Pulled by four tremendous white stallions, the carriage, black like lacquered wood he had once seen, with its ornate gold trim shimmered in the morning light. White gauze curtains hid the interior from view, not that he could have seen much at the distance between him and the road. A driver and a soldier rode the carriage, and two footmen clung to the rails on the back. The sparkling black of the carriage contrasted fiercely with the pure white of the horses and dusty grey stone of the road.

The carriage rumbled to a halt, and the rest of the caravan stopped as well. One of the men Duncan thought a knight rode to the window of the coach and paused for a moment. He wondered if a snake may have frightened the horse because it stumbled back away from the coach. Even at the distance Duncan stood from the road, he saw the horse's eyes wide and white in terror. The knight was an exceptional rider, however, and his calm command of his animal let him keep his place in the saddle. The knight moved away, but Duncan saw his nervous glances back toward the passenger in the carriage.

As the window came into clear view, Duncan could see a young woman leaning out, staring at him and Gilroy.

Her long hair, the color of golden wheat ready for harvest, streamed away from the carriage window in the breeze. Her hair sparkled in the sun and threw scintillating flashes of light in all directions. Duncan couldn't see her face clearly across the field, but his heart and mind told him it would be pretty, with a small, upturned nose.

His breath seemed to freeze in his chest as his imagination filled in the blanks between what he could and couldn't see. The high cheekbones covered with soft, smooth skin the color of milk filled his mind. That tiny nose slightly turned, resting comfortably between eyes of sapphire blue. He could see her long blonde hair spilling over her shoulders to outline round breasts, high and firm. The slimness of her waist gave way to hips that would move delightfully as she walked. Her amazing shapely hips were perched atop long, curvaceous legs. Her gaze seemed to drift over Gilroy a few times and then turned to

him. Even though he could not see her eyes clearly, Duncan felt them stab into him, as if she looked directly into his very soul.

Without warning, a chill passed through the air. Duncan realized his body, not the air, seemed to go cold as he felt the hair on his neck stir to stand on end. He glanced about quickly, his instincts all screaming at him that danger was near, that some horrendous killer stalked the countryside, dark and bloodthirsty.

He felt more than he saw Gilroy shiver and clutch his arms about his body. Gilroy's voice came soft as a whisper, and a trembling fear poured through. "Sooder folley, Duncan."

The beautiful woman pulled her head back inside the carriage, and it moved away.

Duncan swallowed and the chill left his bones. "Ye're mad or drunk."

"Nay. Mark my words. Sooder folley."

Duncan tried to laugh, but it came out as a snort. "There's nay such thing."

With the echoes of the chill still in him, Duncan wondered if he believed that.

\* \* \*

Melissa stared out the window of her chambers in the castle. The house servants greeted her and ushered her here as soon as she arrived. The servants said her soon-to-be husband would join her for dinner. Like so many other things, this didn't matter. In the scheme of a life that had lasted more than three thousand years, and would continue for at least that much, a few hours amounted to less than nothing.

As she stared out over the rocky landscape, her mind continuously drifted back to the big man she had seen in the fields earlier. Something about him had grabbed her attention, but she did not know what. Perhaps it wasn't he at all, but his spindly friend instead.

The dirty, skinny man knew what she was. Somehow, he could see through the façade and had pegged her. Some mortals, she knew, had that ability. Something like a sixth sense let them spot predators long before the others. Perhaps that let them outlive their companions.

She smiled a little, remembering the precognitive dream of the man who, in five hundred years, would explain all of that to a shocked and pious world.

Melissa stood and walked to the balcony of her suite. She passed the heavy tapestries hanging on the cold stone walls and shook her head. Compared to those found within her last home in England, these were mere rugs. Still, McGill Keep wasn't all that bad, she conceded. She'd lived in worse places.

She leaned on the railing and looked over her new fiefdom. She felt no shame at the idea of how she would control her future husband. Mortal men were so easy to manipulate. She wouldn't even need to use the subtle nudges to his mind and thoughts of which her kind were capable. Sex alone easily controlled mortal men.

For the right behaviors on her part, for the right treats in bed, he would do anything she asked. By withholding her body from him, she could get him to take on the entire English army with a broom straw.

If her new husband tried to force himself on her, he would have a nasty surprise. She had learned, however, over the centuries of living with mortal men, that even token resistance followed by submission made an effective tool to manipulate men.

But she felt no shame from such methods of control. She only did what females of her kind had done for all time. It was nothing to be ashamed of, simply a means to an end.

She felt the telltale compression of the air as someone moved in the suite behind her. Instinct took over, and the change moved over Melissa in a limited way. Her ears, eyes, and nose became more aware, and a faint green colored her vision as she moved slowly to turn to face the room.

A voice that echoed across the millennia and yet also from just a few decades past reached her ears before she could complete her turn.

"Aset Ma'at Amen."

She froze. Only one person knew that name, a name she hadn't used since he killed her.

She turned to face him. "You."

The small man smiled gently. "Yes, it is me." Despite having seen him last more than four decades ago, he hadn't changed. His hair had the color of the rats and mice that infested the temples of home. His skin held a milky pallor to match that of the priesthood of Anubis from which he arose. It was his eyes, the color of metal worked in a forge and cleaned of the scale left behind, that always transfixed her.

On that night so many years ago, in the gardens of Ma'at at her temple, it had been his eyes that had first attracted her. He hadn't needed to use the powers of his mind to control or subdue her. She had willingly given herself to him, willingly damned herself for all time.

"Set Ankh Halus, what are you doing here? What do you want?"

He tilted his head to the side, and a sad smile came to his face. "The same thing I have always wanted. You." He seemed to shrug just a little and the sadness faded from the smile, replaced by something akin to childish joy at some hidden secret. "As for what I'm doing here, that involves my new name. You can call me Angus. Angus McGill."

Even though she knew from the royal Scottish kilt and trappings he wore that this was coming, her heart pounded in her chest. The shock, even forewarned, caused the change to leap upon her. Her vision flashed to sense heat, green hues for cool objects like the table and other furniture, a glaring white for the flickering torches, and an eerie red with white tinges around the edges for his glowing body. She felt the fangs growing long and hard in her

mouth, parting her lips, as she prepared to attack.

She lunged at him, but he had already moved. With a terrifying speed gained from more than ten thousands years of predation, he stepped to the side and almost casually grasped her wrists in his hand.

His small body belied his true strength, and he held her without effort. When he yanked her roughly, bringing her face only inches from his, Melissa saw his eyes. The change had come over him as well.

His voice came as a powerful, low growl like the rumbling of a tiger. "You wish to kill me? Remember, my love, we cannot die."

"I am not your love." Raising her voice would only be a waste of energy, and she needed every ounce to escape him. "And I never will be. You made me this."

"Perhaps I did, but you joined me of your own free will." He smiled, and she realized his smile always pleased and terrified her. No matter what else, he'd been her only first love for the last three thousand years, and he always would be, but the smile hinted at the killer lurking just behind the white teeth, not unlike the smiling crocodiles along the Nile that grinned at the reed-gather before attacking. "Melissa."

She struggled against his grip, but she could not escape. "Bastard!" She spat at his face.

He easily dodged the spittle, moving like lightning. "You will never learn." With a casual flip of his arm, he flung her through the air and she landed roughly on the bed. The impact of her body caused the supporting ropes under the down-filled mattress to creak and groan, and her sharpened hearing picked up the snapping of at least one rope as it gave way under the strain. Springing to her hands and knees, Melissa growled and hissed at him. "Take me if you will, but know that you'll carry the scars."

McGill laughed out loud. "My love, I could take you if I desired, and the cuts will only add to the pleasure before they heal. I will not take you. Not now." The rumbling growl of his killer's voice wasn't the only thing that made the thinly veiled threat so sinister. She knew McGill's soul was tainted and putrid from his thousands of years of dealing death. He walked to stand beside the bed. He didn't need to raise his voice as the mortals did to be threatening. "You have had a shock and need time to adjust. And we have all the time in the world."

He reached to stroke her cheek, and Melissa snapped at his hand. He again moved in a flash, and her teeth slammed together with a loud click.

McGill chuckled and left her chambers, taking one last glance back at her kneeling on the bed. As she had thought so many times in the past, Melissa thought she saw a hint of sadness and tenderness in the face of the monster.

\* \* \* :

He hummed to himself as he made his way back to the Great Hall. McGill had some details to attend to relating to a peasant who refused to pay his taxes. *Perhaps*, he thought, *I will feed today.* 

His new bride had reacted just as he knew she would. He knew not by some mysterious power of his mind, but from past experience. She had always reacted this way. Angry, threatening, and trying to kill him, but she would calm down soon. Just as she always calmed herself when she saw the inevitable path they must follow.

More than three thousand years ago, he made her into what they both are today. His kind knew the truth, unlike the superstitious mortal fools. An illness brought about the change, not cursing the gods or even one particular god. He had seen in his dreams that mortals would one day learn of things called *viruses*. Perhaps this was a *virus*. Maybe there would one day be a cure, but none of his kind ever saw that in a dream.

Some of the legends about his kind that the mortals spoke were true, and many held a kernel of truth. Many more were just plain wrong. The long fangs that grew and were used to tear out the throats of his victims were real. He could also use his fangs to infect a victim with the illness by carefully, gently, puncturing the skin to pierce the veins. He and his kind drank the blood of the living for nourishment. This much was true. Once drained of blood, the victims did not arise as the undead.

Different people in different places called McGill and his kind by various names. The most common, from Eastern Europe, was *vampire*. Here in Scotland, and Ireland, the Gaelic tongue simply called them the *sooder folley*. Literally, blood suckers.

Most of the legends held that the vampire could only go out at night and that the sun would kill them. McGill smiled as he passed through the bright rays of the afternoon sun streaming through the window. The position of the Aten had nothing to do with it.

No one knew if his kind were truly immortal. McGill was more than ten thousand years old. He knew of others nearly twice that age, dating back to the dawning of human civilization. The little white lie all vampires shared was that they couldn't die. It simply wasn't true.

The legends held that a wooden stake driven through the heart, or decapitation followed by burning the body, would kill him, but the legends also missed the mark.

Perhaps tied to another legend, the ingestion or introduction of silver into the body of the sooder folley would indeed kill them. This, along with the precognitive dreams, led some of his kind to believe it was the ability of the silver to kill the *viruses* that would cause death.

McGill knew that death would come for him one day, probably at the hands of his soon-to-be beloved wife.

As he approached the door to the Great Hall, he heard the peasant protesting his innocence to the guards.

Yes, he would feed today.

\* \* \* :

"Ye're drunk, mad, or both." Duncan tossed back the last of his ale and waved at the wench for more.

Gilroy shook his head. "Nay, she's sooder folley. Dinna ye feel it?"

"Nay. Even if there were such things, how would ye know? It's nay like ye're a famous churchman in town."

"I don't understand how I ken, but I do."

The wench brought two more mugs of ale. Duncan sipped to get the head down. "I still say ye're mad."

"Then how do ye explain those poor souls who hae gone missing around here? McGill is one of them too, and now she's here to spawn with the devil himself!"

"There are robbers and English about, that's all. These people who hae gone missing just ran afoul of them." Duncan shrugged. "Maybe the children just became lost."

"And I say ye are not seeing it right."

As Duncan prepared to remand Gilroy again, one of the villagers rushed into the pub, sweat streaming down his face.

"We just found old MacRath dead!" The man collapsed into a chair, grabbed the nearest mug to his hand, and drank deeply. Ale ran down his chin and neck as he gulped for both beer and air.

The village didn't have a proper church, but it had a priest, as much of a priest as Brother Bryce could be between drunken stupors. If the villager had come in an hour later, the priest would have been unconscious.

Brother Bryce stumbled to the table and sat down hard across from the panting farmer. "Now, MacCallen, just calm down and tell us what ye ken about this."

The empty mug made a loud clack as MacCallen slammed it down on the table. "Brother, it's terrible! He's dead, old MacRath is, and some wild beast is to blame! His throat is torn out!"

The priest quickly made the sign of the cross and mumbled something in Latin that Duncan didn't understand. "May God rest his soul. Where is the body

now? I'll be giving him the last rites."

"We left him where he was found, with four good men and torches to keep the other animals from..." MacCallen trailed off, his eyes going round. He snatched another half-full mug from the table and poured most of the ale on him instead of in him.

Because the priest looked just as shocked at the idea of MacRath being eaten as MacCallen, Duncan decided to step in. "That's good thinking. We should go fetch the poor wretch." He hesitated, judging if MacCallen would be able to even show them the place. "Can you take us to him?"

"Aye, I think so." The man shivered a little. "Tis a horrid sight, though."

"I know. Come, let's go." Duncan turned to speak to Gilroy, but he was nowhere to be seen.

\* \* \*

She had decided McGill would have to drag her to dinner by force. She wouldn't go on her own. Yet, Melissa now found herself following one of the servants to the dining hall.

After passing through a maze of halls and passageways, the servant stopped before a towering wooden door. Dark and foreboding, Melissa knew that nothing good would lie within. The man pulled the door open and bowed as she entered. The huge plank slammed solidly shut behind her.

In the flickering light of the torches held in stanchions around the walls of the large room, she made out a long table. At the near end was a single place setting. At the far end sat McGill, silently smiling at her.

He waved his arm at the empty chair near her. "Please, be seated."

The dancing shadows on the wall seemed to morph into gyrating forms locked in mortal combat. Her senses, heightened by her nervousness of being so close to McGill, amplified the effect, but she moved to the chair and sat down.

The man smiled. Melissa knew that smile hadn't changed a bit in three thousand years, but while it had looked so inviting and caring once, it now looked malevolent. The darting rays of the torches splashed over his face, and she could see millennia of death there. How many mortals had he killed over the long centuries?

But, she knew that she herself was no better. She too killed humans to feed, to live. And that was the way of all life. The strong fed on the weak. The mouse killed the bug. The hawk killed the mouse. The eagle killed the hawk. The leopard killed the eagle. Why should her kind be any different?

McGill nodded to the wine goblet resting on the table before her. "Please, drink and relax."

She lifted the goblet and swirled it gently, the red fluid lapping at the sides of the vessel. Melissa looked up and found his gaze fixed on her. "And I suppose now you'll make a toast after the mortal custom."

"Yes, I shall." He lifted his own goblet and tilted it toward her. "To you, Melissa." A wry smile came to his lips. "Long life."

"Bastard." She sipped at the wine.

The flavor filled her mouth like a crashing wave. The slight copper-like tinge made her shiver as the fluid slipped over her tongue and down her throat.

She gulped the liquid as the change came over her. When she looked up, McGill was still at the end of the table smiling softly. Through the green tint of her killer vision, his form was glowing red and white from the heat of his body.

Forcing the goblet from her lips, she gasped. "Blood! Human blood!"

"Yes, my love." He shrugged. "No one will miss just another peasant."

Anger replaced the satiation she felt only an instant before. "How dare you!"

She lunged from the chair, sailing over the table at him with her fangs exposed to rip at his flesh. As she flew, she saw McGill flash in an instant, the change taking his body faster than she thought possible. He easily caught her hands and flipped her through the intervening space, slamming her against the wall padded only by the thin tapestry.

Before she could move from her crumpled position on the floor, he was on her. He yanked her long hair and pulled her up to stand before him. McGill's lips peeled back to fully expose the two-inch fangs, which shimmered pearly white in the torchlight.

He growled again, and he grinned. "Why must we do this dance every time we meet?"

"You knew the blood would push me over!"

Throwing his head back to laugh, McGill exposed his throat to her, but his hands held her fast. She couldn't move to bite him any more than she could resist the powers of the blood.

"My love, we always do this, as we have for three thousand years."

She sighed. "Quod me nutrit me destruit."

"Yes, and I, as well."

His steel eyes seemed to soften a bit, though they were still the deadly eyes of a ferocious killer. He pulled her face to his, his lips pressing to hers. Their fangs clicked together, and she felt the sharp points of his teeth pricking the skin of her lips and tongue. His grip lessened on her wrists, but despite her outward desire to harm—or if possible, to kill him—she wrapped her arms around his waist to pull herself closer to him. His mouth moved over her face, the tips of his fangs digging into the soft skin of her cheeks.

As she had done thousands of years ago, Melissa leaned her head back, her heart pounding like a drum and her breath pulsing quickly in and out of her body. Her throat was fully exposed to him, inviting the bite that would bring the immortal curse on her yet again.

She had spent the last three millennia looking for a cure from the illness or an absolution from the curse this man placed on her, but she would do it all again and without hesitation. Melissa wanted to believe it was the effect of the blood, the tangy nourishment that triggered these feelings in her. Perhaps some part of the evolution of this sickness or damnation pushed her to find one of her kind to mate.

But as he moved his hands over her breasts, squeezing firmly and yet with an odd tenderness for a predator, she knew that far more than a simple drive to procreate made her want McGill.

Just as she had on that night in the gardens of Ma'at, she loved him and wanted him. The last remaining rational bit of her mind knew she always would.

Because he stood only a little taller than her own petit frame, Melissa could feel McGill's hard cock pressed against her stomach. She longed to feel him fill her, as he had done so many times in the past.

He gripped the material of her blouse and ripped the cloth from her, leaving her breasts exposed. He leaned and sucked her nipple into his mouth, the pointy tips of his teeth poking into the skin sending chills through her. He moved his hand under her skirt and kirtle, and the nails lengthened to talons flicked over her clit, making her jump.

As his fingers pushed against her cunt, Melissa felt the odd combination of passions common to her kind wash over her. There was the passion of the sex pushing her mind further and further from what mortals call rational thought. Did the tiger or the lion or the leopard remain rational in the throes of sexual congress? What of the mortals themselves?

He straightened and flung her, without effort, onto the long table, the impact causing dishes and goblets to rattle. His face contorted into an expression that haunted the nightmares of mortals. McGill's fangs glistened wetly in the flickering light. His eyes held a cat-like shape, and his pupils glowed green set in the blood-red irises against the jet black of the eyeball itself. His face twisted into a grimace that few living mortals had ever seen, one to cause strong men to scream and cry.

Melissa knew she looked the same now as the second passion moved over her—the passion of the hunt and, eventually, the kill.

McGill ripped at his clothes as he growled. His rigid cock sprang from his kilt as he shredded the material with his claws, and as it always did, the sight made her yelp with the anticipation of what was to come.

She pulled at her tattered clothing, ripping the fragments away to leave her fully naked on the table. She shook with desire and passion, but some part of her knew that the love she had always felt for this man, this monster, raged within her as well.

He leaped through the air to land atop her. In a single firm stroke, his cock entered and filled her cunt completely. As she wrapped her legs around his hips, his thrusting became intense, causing the heavy oak table to slide with raking sounds on the worn stone floor.

They grunted and growled together, his lips finding hers and his tongue flickering deeply into her mouth. McGill gripped her hips with a frightful ferocity as he slammed his raging hardness into her again and again. The passion had come on him and the animal zeal had taken control.

Her own zeal and passion assaulted Melissa. Her hips thrust back against his as he pounded against her. She longed for just a fraction more of his hardness to enter her with each push. The tingle of his claws digging into the skin of her hips drove her to want even more. Her own claws ripped at the skin of his back, leaving wounds that would infect and kill a mortal man. McGill would heal in a matter of minutes.

Despite the cause of her curse or illness, Melissa had been a mortal woman in the distant past, and passions and desires still lived in her. The pure pleasure of his hard cock sliding in and out of her wet cunt, filling her to near bursting, gave her a satisfaction she had never known.

Her body shivered, and the waves of her orgasm crashed down upon her. Voicing a growl able to make mortal men faint away, she dug her claws deeply into McGill's back until she felt them scraping bone. She bucked and flailed under him as the tempo of his thrusts increased.

Suddenly, he slammed against her and roared like a lion. His hot seed erupted into her like the flowing lava she'd seen on the islands of the seas in the Far East. He collapsed, becoming deadweight on top of her.

After a few moments, McGill managed to lift himself onto one arm and looked down into her face. The change had receded with the tide of their passion, and his face held that old, gentle smile she knew so well from the many centuries they had known each other.

"Why could we not just have done that without the preliminary hostilities?"

"Bastard."

\* \* \* \*

The scene of MacRath's death was just as MacCallen had described it: Horrid.

The constable was away and wouldn't be back for several weeks, but Duncan didn't think that mattered much. The man was dead, his throat ripped out by some animal or another. Nothing more and nothing less.

The pale form of MacRath rested face-up on a stony outcropping, his eyes wide open and an expression of terror on his countenance. Duncan did wonder about a few things, though.

What animal could have done this? He'd seen men mauled by bears before, and they hadn't looked like this. Other than the left side of his neck ripped open, there wasn't another mark on the body that Duncan could see. A cat would have left scratches.

He could see no places on the body where an animal had chewed it. The animal hadn't eaten MacRath, simply killed him. Unlike men, animals didn't kill for sport or the joy of the kill. Animals killed to eat.

It didn't look like a wound from any weapon he knew of, either.

There was no blood on the ground around MacRath, either. When he was a child, a man his father had hired to help with the harvest one year had been using a scythe to cut the grain. Somehow, the blade had come loose from the handle and had swung around, hitting the man's neck and nearly cutting his head off. Blood, lots of blood, went everywhere until the man died. And yet here, Duncan saw only a few small drops of red on the rocks.

While puzzling this, Duncan knew his place. His place wasn't to worry about such things. That was for educated men.

He listened as Bother Bryce said the last rites. Then, he gathered limbs and the men made a stretcher. They carried MacRath home to his wife so she could bury him.

\* \* \* \*

The wedding ceremony was as much of a farce as the marriage itself. Some nasty priest who reeked of ale said a few words she didn't listen to, and that was that.

Melissa avoided McGill as much a she could. She both hated and loved him. The hatred was easy to understand. He'd damned her to immortality and feeding on living things. Not cattle or chickens, but thinking beings. The love side was harder. Even after three thousand years, she didn't understand the intense attraction she had for him. The reaction of her body—the moist flow from her cunt, the warmth spreading over her breasts—that was even stranger.

So she avoided him. In the week since they were married, she'd seen him twice. That was two times too many.

Today she decided to go out and survey her lands. As a child, she had learned to ride a horse and to handle a chariot. Now, she rode the horse McGill had provided to her. A large white mare with fire and spirit, the horse proved surefooted and steady under the reins.

She managed to convince the guards to stay behind, and she rode the countryside alone. Not that anything or anyone could have been an actual threat to her. Not even the wildcats or rabbit-headed cats offered a danger.

As she rounded a curve in the road, she saw a man working in a field. Stopping the horse, Melissa realized she was looking at the same field where she had seen the two men upon her arrival to this forsaken land. Her senses picked up the smell of the man, and she smiled a little as she recognized his scent.

She rode on toward him.

He watched her as the horse clattered over the stone road until she reached the point nearest to him.

"Ho, farmer! Come to me!" The coat of arms on the saddle blanket clearly showed, and she saw his eyes flicker to it for a moment.

As he walked through the poor soil, the muscles in his legs, arms, and neck flexed and bunched like small boulders under his tan skin. Melissa swallowed to clear the freely running saliva in her mouth.

He reached the fence and leaned his hoe against it. "My lady." He bowed, but only slightly.

"Are you the tenant of my husband for this land?"

"I am. Congratulations on your wedding." His smile faltered a little as his gaze drifted down her chest, over her hips, and settled for a second on the exposed skin of her leg resting against the horse's flank. "I'm Duncan Campbell."

She pulled her gaze away from his hazel eyes and looked at the field. "I'd like to better see your workings of my husband's fields. Come help me down."

Campbell smiled a little, and he hopped over the low fence. When she turned in the saddle, he put his hands on her waist and lifted her without effort. The strength and heat in his touch made her shiver a little. Without pause, he turned and lowered her gently to the ground on the other side of the fence before hopping back over again to stand beside her.

"What would ye like to see, my lady?"

She didn't think that the way her pelvis ached for him that there were very many safe answers. "Show me what you are planting."

"Very well." He walked beside her as they moved to where he'd been working. "Just wheat is all. Surely nothing special for a noblewoman."

"And then you are wrong, farmer Campbell." His brogue fascinated her. Unlike McGill's cultured and learned style of speech, this man spoke as he always had. "As the lady of the keep, I'm interested in what our charges do."

He chuckled a little. "Very well, then. Not much to it, really. Just scratch into the ground to get enough dirt for the seeds to grow." He kicked a rock. "In this poor excuse for dirt, 'tis nae easy, though."

"I can imagine." She saw a few green sprouts poking through the soil. "Are these your wheat?"

"Aye." Thunder rumbled in the distance, and he looked up at the sky. "Rain coming. Ye should get to the keep."

Thick clouds boiled over the hills, black with the rain they carried. "I'll never get back to the castle in time."

He nodded. "Ye go to yonder barn, and I'll fetch your horse." He pointed to a decrepit shack at the edge of the field before turning toward the waiting

Standing alone in the field, she decided she should listen to the man. This was his home, and he would know the weather. She made for the barn.

She'd almost reached the shack when the rain started. It didn't start with a few drops and then build. The heavens simply opened up like a bucket. She sprinted the last of the distance.

Once inside, she wiped the rain from her face and looked outside. Duncan came across the field, slowly leading the horse by the reins. He didn't seem to notice the rain pounding him as he walked.

Entering the barn, he tied the horse to a pole and shook his head. His hair, the color of sand on the beaches with a reddish tint, flew around his head like a great billowing auburn cloud. Specks of water danced in every direction, some splashing softly against her. As her gaze drifted down his body, she saw the water shimmering on his bulging arms, tracking slowly down to drip delightfully from his fingers. The rain soaked his shirt, which clung to his chest like a second skin, outlining and highlighting the firm swelling of his chest leading to the rippled plateau of his stomach.

Knowing full well she should turn away, Melissa let her gaze slip farther. His pants were no less wet than the rest of him, and they too stuck to him like paint. The bulge in his trousers protruded as much as those in his shirt. Clearly outlined by the wet material, his cock was long, and her mouth again watered.

His speaking distracted her thoughts and snapped her back to reality. "Did ye get too wet?"

"Um, no. I'm fine."

His face held an amused look. "That's just fine, then. These rains come almost everyday, but they dinna last long."

She tried to keep her imagination in check. "I've noticed them, but I haven't yet discerned the pattern."

"Aye, ye haven't been here long enough."

She needed a safe subject. "Have you lived here all your life?"

"I have." Duncan pointed to where the castle lay hidden by the mists kicked up by the rain. "I hae never lived out of sight of yon castle."

"That would get boring after a time, I would think."

He shrugged. "Nay, not for we farmers. We like to stay put and be left alone to go about our business."

"Other than farming, what is your business? Taking care of your wife and children, I'd wager."

"No, my lady. I hae neither wife nor children." He smiled a little, and a dreamlike look came to his eyes. "One day, I'll be blessed with both."

"You seem a fine man, Duncan Campbell, and I'm sure any woman would feel blessed by your attention." This wasn't the safe subject she looked for.

"Perhaps so." He suddenly smiled as he stared out at the rain. "Come here, my lady, and look upon this bonny sight."

He pointed off to the west, and she stepped to the door so she could see of what he spoke. The hay on the barn floor concealed a small stone, and her toe hit squarely against the rock, causing her to stumble.

With no warning, his arms suddenly encircled her, catching her before she could fall. She shook in his embrace. The bulging muscles pressed against her, and the clean smell of hard work filled her nose.

He looked concerned. "Are ye hurt?"

She struggled for her breath as she panted. Her eyes locked onto his, and somehow his embrace made her feel safe. In the larger scheme of this, Duncan was a food animal to her. In an instant, however, all thoughts of being an ancient predator and of the vast differences between her and mortals vanished into the caring hazel eyes staring at her.

This is, she thought, wrong for a million reasons.

She struggled to get her feet under her and stood up, pulling away from his arms. "Yes. Thank you."

He just nodded. "Come see."

She avoided the rock and looked out the door to where he pointed.

Stretched across the sky was a rainbow. Bright and multihued, it glowed with a light to accompany miracles.

\* \* \*

Duncan watched her as she caught sight of the rainbow. Her face went slack for a moment, and then it split into a smile the likes of which he'd seen only rarely, and then on the visage of small children—their eyes full of wonder at the new and magical world.

As she watched the sky, he allowed his gaze to drift over her. Small, more than a foot shorter than he, she looked soft and smooth all over. Her face was as he'd imagined it that day he had seen her in the carriage. Her cheekbones were high and a slight blush seemed to touch them all the time. The little nose, turned up at the end, crinkled in delicious ways when she smiled. Her eyes amazed him, though. Blue—the color of precious sapphires he'd seen the wives of the wealthy merchants of the bishopric of Glasgow wearing. He'd also heard sailors speak of the deep blue seas, though he'd never seen them, and wondered if they were her color.

Her hair, only glimpsed before, was more the color of gold rather than of wheat ready to harvest. And it flowed like oil on water when she moved, smooth and easy. When she had stumbled and he had helped her, the touch of the long hair definitely wasn't that of coarse straw. It had felt like nothing else in his experience, soft and gentle against the skin of his arms. Even the softest furs sold in the markets felt like rough stubble compared to her hair.

When she tripped on the rock, he'd caught her. Without thinking of her position, or his, he just reacted. She ended up in his arms.

His first thought was that she would slap him. His second thought was that she would tell her husband and he would soon lose the company of his head to his shoulders. Somehow, though, the look on her face told him that neither would happen.

She turned from the rainbow and smiled. The smile seemed to banish the rain and clouds, and the sun poured down on the now wet field.

"That is a beautiful sight. Does it happen often here?"

Duncan feared his voice might squeak like a boy when he spoke. "Aye, it does, but none so beautiful as today."

Her smile wavered a bit. "How special a place this is." A frown came to her lips. "I should return. My husband and the servants will worry for me."

He glanced at the field. "I think your horse will do well on the mud if ye take care."

"She will."

He brought her horse to the door and held his hand down for her to step up to the saddle.

Lady McGill leaned over in the saddle and held her hand out to him. "Thank you for an interesting visit, Duncan Campbell."

He took the tiny, soft hand in his and leaned to kiss the back. The creamy skin felt smooth and supple beneath his lips, and the touch made him tingle. "Twas my pleasure, Lady McGill."

She smiled again and rode out across the field toward the road.

Duncan licked his lips as she rode, her hips swaying slowly as the horse moved from side to side. Her hand had tasted of some flower or another, or perhaps it was a rare and expensive spice.

No matter which, Duncan knew his place.

Longing after the wife of the lord of the keep wasn't his place at all. Not even close.

\* \* \*

"Where did you go today?" McGill picked at his pheasant. Mortal food filled his belly and gave his kind some benefits, but it was not his preferred food. He wanted peasant instead.

"Just for a ride through the village and farms." Melissa wouldn't look at his face.

"Without an escort. While that is safe for us for several reasons, it does not look right to the villagers. They expect us to have soldiers and servants around us." He set down his fork and looked down the table at her. "You should know better."

"I do, but I didn't care. I wanted to be alone."

She lied, and he knew it. He didn't need the reports from his spies to know, either. More than a millennia of life had taught him to read others like they read books. "Melissa, do not lie to me. Who was this man you spoke to?"

"Just a farmer. He showed me his fields and crops."

"First, they are my fields, not his. Just like the house he lives in and the crops he grows."

"As you like."

"What I like has little to do with anything."

She barked a laugh. "Like you want me to come to your bed?"

"Yes, there is that." Despite the session they had shared in this very room, it had not repeated, and he knew she had been avoiding him. "You need to be with your own kind."

"I don't even know what my own kind are. I know you are a killer."

He smiled. She always came back to this. "And you have never killed a mortal?"

"You know I have. Because of you."

"We have been down this road before. Do not fall in love with this mortal. You will only end his life prematurely." He stood and paced to the window, looking out at the falling darkness. "These peasants rarely live past fifty anyway. This man is perhaps half of that many years. Would you snatch the precious time he has from him for no reason at all?"

Melissa sat quietly for a time. "What makes you think I'm falling in love with anyone?"

"I never said you are."

"Oh."

He knew her so well. She spent so much time fighting what she was that she never learned how to be normal. At least normal for a vampire. Maybe the time had come to press her.

"I forbid you to leave the castle alone and to ever see that man again."

"You don't own me." She slammed her fork on the table. "You have no control over me!"

He turned from the window. Despite what she thought of him, he hated to do this, even to a mortal, let alone her. Reaching out with his mind, using skills learned over more than a hundred centuries, McGill touched her thoughts.

She jumped up from the table, knocking the chair over with a loud crash. A look of fear—no, terror—spread over her face, and Melissa slapped her hands to her temples.

"Stop it! Just stop!"

the mortals."

He toyed with her thoughts, pointing out that he could, should he elect, indeed control her. And that she was powerless to stop him. A thought saddened him a little. Had she but trained with him to use the skills her form gave her, she would stand a chance of resisting him. As things stood, she could do nothing more than cry.

She staggered from the table and collapsed on the floor before the huge, dark stone fireplace. Holding her head in her hands, she whimpered. "All right! I'll do as you say! Just please stop!"

The sight of her in pain caused something in his mind to snap. He pulled back, releasing his grip on her, and walked as quickly as he could without running to kneel beside her.

Forcing a smile, McGill brushed away a tear that ran down her cheek with the back of his hand. "I am sorry, but you must learn that we are different from

"I know we're different." She sniffed loudly. "I don't want to be different!"

As he'd told her countless times over thirty centuries, he said, "If I could turn back time, I would not have done this to you."

Maybe he'd never meant it as much before as he did now, watching the woman he loved, but could never have, sobbing in pain because of his actions.

\* \* \* \*

Roland walked through the ruins with Stanley beside him giving commentary now and then about some particular part of the castle.

"You see, Roland, this area was once the Great Hall of the castle. It was here that Angus McGill held audience with the peasants needing his attentions."

Roland nodded. "I understand." He closed his eyes for a moment, visualizing the walls still standing, covered by fine tapestries, and torches lighting the darkness, casting flickering shadow demons into the corners. The dark pictures Markinson painted in his stories spoke of creatures more frightful than the demons themselves hiding in those shadows.

And there, just on the edge between darkness and light, hovering between fantasy and nightmares, was Elektra. Terrifyingly beautiful, seductive in the same manner as the Sirens of the Odyssey, her flaming red hair, sapphire blue eyes, and staggering figure had, in Stanley's books, drawn countless men into the web of the spider only to meet their death at her hands.

Even now, nearly three years after he read the first of the books based on the vampire Elektra, some of the images gave him the willies. The stories Stanley told were, maybe, too good. They could *almost* be real. Elektra could *almost* be real. He wondered how Markinson slept at night.

Valerie came around the corner near the remains of the fireplace. She flicked her gaze away from Stanley, intent on not looking at him. "I just came to tell you both that lunch..."

She put her hand to her temple and frowned. Before Roland could even move, she fell to the stone floor, but he made it to her in time to keep her head from hitting the unyielding rock.

"Baby? What's wrong?"

Her eyes looked empty for a moment, as if the lights were on but nobody was home. "I ... I don't know. I think I'm OK now."

Stanley stood beside them, his hands shoved casually in his pockets. "Perhaps it is just the heat."

She looked up at the novelist for a moment. "Maybe that's it."

Roland looked at the pair for a second. Something just happened, and he had no clue what. Then again, it didn't matter too much. "Yeah, maybe. Can you stand and walk?"

"I think so, yes." He helped her to her feet, and she seemed stable enough to stand without help. She took a couple of wobbly steps, but quickly became steadier as she regained some of the poise he found so attractive. "I think I'm just hungry." She looked intently at Markinson again. "And the heat probably got to me, too."

As the trio made their way to the RV for lunch, Markinson kept humming some tune Roland thought would sound better on bagpipes.

#### \*\*\*

## Scotland, 1301

Duncan stopped with the mug halfway to his lips, sloshing ale onto the table. "Ye're going to do what?"

Gilroy seemed to shiver despite the heat of the day. "I'm going to pay a visit to McGill and see if he's sooder folley."

"Are ye mad? He'll either laugh ye out the door or hae ye killed for your arrogance!"

He clearly shivered now. "Aye, but I'll know then." Gilroy took a huge swallow of ale. "And so will all the rest of you."

Duncan thought furiously. Gilroy wasn't in his cups yet, so he wouldn't just sleep this idea off. "I canna let ye do this, Gilroy."

He laughed a little. "Ye canna stop me."

He was right. "Can I talk ye out of it, then?"

"Nay. I owe it to old MacRath. Someone has to expose McGill, and I'll do it."

Duncan had known Gilroy since they had been boys, playing together at the edge of the fields as their fathers worked the land. He understood that his oldest friend had made up his mind, and there was no changing it. "And so this is why ye pulled me from the fields to drink instead of working?"

"Aye." Gilroy tossed back the last of his ale. "Farewell, my friend." He turned and walked out the door.

\* \* \*

McGill sat in the Great Hall tallying the taxes. He sighed to himself. Even immortals had to deal with the mundane realities of life.

The big door swung open slowly and one of the guards came inside. "Lord, a peasant demands audience with you."

"Demands? Send him away." Some of the peasants seemed to think this was a democracy.

"He insists, my lord." The guard smiled a little. "He's some ale in him and perhaps might be an entertainment for you."

A little distraction didn't sound all that bad, now that he thought about it. "Very well, send him in."

The guard nodded and withdrew. A moment later, a dirty, skinny man stumbled into the room, shoved through the open door by the guards. The door

slammed shut behind him.

McGill stared at the peasant for a few seconds. "What is so important that ye dare to interrupt me?"

The man shivered, but showed no other signs of fear. "I have come merely to look upon ye, my lord."

Something clicked in McGill's mind. *This*, he thought, *is one who knows*. Some mortals, for some reason, could sense his kind. No one knew how they could do it, but some believed it to be a survival skill. Most of the work in avoiding death by the teeth of a predator was knowing that the predator was there. It took skill and training and practice garnered over centuries of life, but McGill could block this.

"So, peasant, have ye a name?"

"I do, lord. I am called Gilroy McBarens."

"And what is it that Gilroy McBarens does for his lord?"

"My lord, I drink the finest ale in all Scotland brewed from the finest grain in all Scotland, grown right here in the finest keep in all Scotland."

McGill had to smile at the man. Most drunks knew how to be sarcastic, and this one did not disappoint. "My thanks for the compliments on my lands. So, ye are only a leech on my people and serve no purpose to the common good?"

"It's that common good that brings me here this day, lord."

"And how is that, good Gilroy?"

The peasant waved his arm expansively around the room. "To see if these fine and expensive trappings hide a sinister secret."

McGill frowned. "What secret might that be?"

"That ye, my lord, are sooder folley."

He held his face firmly rigid and expressionless, but his mind raced. Who had this fool told of his suspicions? McGill couldn't look into the man's mind without revealing himself. "And what if I am? Would I not simply kill and eat you now?"

"Oh, Lord McGill, ye wouldn't do that. Many people know I hae come here to see ye. And ye would only drink my blood, not eat my body."

He considered killing the man, but if he told the truth, others would miss him quickly. "Ye should go before I lose my good humor."

"So ye deny being sooder folley?"

"I make no comments to those I rule over."

"And ye hae not, my lord." The scrawny man bowed. "I take my leave."

After McBarens had left, McGill sat and wondered how much longer he could stay here.

He looked back to the taxes. Some farmer had underpaid and needed a good talking to. The name looked familiar, and he wondered where he'd seen it before.

Then it came to him. McGill pulled the list of known followers of Robert Bruce from the drawer. There, twelve notches down the list, was the name of Duncan Campbell.

\* \* \* \*

Melissa decided to go to the market in the village and, in partial deference to McGill, she allowed soldiers to escort her.

She wanted to see Duncan Campbell again, but she knew better than to push things that far. While he wouldn't actually kill her, McGill could hurt her.

That was something never mentioned in the mortal legends of vampires. Perhaps the mortals didn't know that vampires felt the pain, even if the wounds didn't kill them.

Inside the coach, she shivered as she recalled the time six hundred years ago when some half-crazed priest stabbed her through the heart with a wooden pole. Standing there impaled on a small tree, all she could do was scream with the pain.

She'd been with McGill, but he called himself Leonardo then. The priest had hacked off McGill's right arm with a sword. That had to have hurt, too, but McGill controlled the pain and acted, ripping the frightened man to shreds with his claws.

Even now, she wondered if they ever found all the pieces for burial.

The carriage rumbled to a stop, and the footmen opened the door for her. She looked out on the market and felt a certain sense of home.

Grain, bread, vegetables, meat, and a score of other goods lay spread across tables that were the full length of the street. The smells, even to her carnivorous predator nose, were delectable and brought back images of her childhood in the temples and gardens when the priests would bring offerings for the gods.

She stepped out, and the people nearest the carriage bowed slightly. Melissa waved her hand for them to rise and go about their business.

As she walked down the long line of tables, peasants frequently offered her goods—bread or ale, once a carrot, and even a lovely shawl that seemed to glitter in the sunlight. She refused all of the offers, though. These people worked hard in the rocky dirt for their livelihood. She should not take gifts from them. She did purchase a small loaf of bread from a vendor, and it was delicious and still warm.

She came to a cross street, and the market branched off into all four directions. She smiled, wondering where to go next. Laughter from the pub on the corner caught her attention, and she casually wondered what joke had caused the excitement. Perhaps someone had just won a wager.

Melissa turned to move down the street again and ran into a wall of a man.

Duncan Campbell held her shoulders to keep her from falling, and he laughed a little. "Steady, my lady."

The soldiers reacted a little slowly, but they did react. She heard the scraping of steel against leather as swords were drawn.

Melissa realized this could turn into a bloodbath. "Hold, Captain!" The soldier stopped withdrawing his sword, but he didn't sheath it. "The man offers no harm. I was not looking where I was going."

She glanced back at Duncan, and he didn't even seem to notice the soldiers at all, let alone that eight men were prepared to dice him up like the onions sold in the stalls nearby.

His eyes saw only her.

Warmth flooded across her cheeks, and her breasts, as she watched him watching her. A gentle smile graced his lips, and his big hands, rough with hard work, gently massaged her shoulders.

The captain of the guard spoke, stopping the spell before fully woven. "My lady, we should move along."

She didn't want to move along, though. She turned to the captain and reached into his mind. While nowhere near as good as McGill, she could control mortals, especially men. "Everything is fine, Captain. Take your men and go back to the carriage. I will be along soon."

The man's face went slack for a moment, as if his flesh would melt from his bones and spill to the stone street. He seemed to shake himself a little. "Yes, my lady." He turned to his men. "Come along, lads." The soldiers moved toward the waiting coach.

For the first time, Duncan seemed to notice the rest of the world around him. He watched the retreating soldiers for a moment. "Why did ye do that?"

"I'd like to talk to you some more."

He smiled. "Not very seemly for the lady of the keep."

"I will decide that."

Duncan looked to his two companions. "Go on, lads. I'll find ye later." The men went into the pub alone.

She wondered what she was doing—other than endangering both herself and Duncan. The guards would tell McGill, or he would just pull it from their brains like lint from a corner. And McGill would be angry. Experience taught her that he was dangerous when angered.

All thoughts of McGill faded when Duncan took her hand in his. "Come, then." He led her down the cross street.

His hand felt warm against her skin, and its coarseness didn't bother her. This was a man who worked, and worked hard, for his living. His needs were simple, and he placed honesty above all. Duncan was completely trustworthy, though she didn't really know how she knew these things. Only, she did.

They came to a small square where a few trees, surrounded by several benches, poked through the grass. He led her to one of the benches and waited until she sat before taking the place next to her.

His smile never faltered. "And so, what did ye want to talk to me about?"

"I don't really know."

He laughed. "Well, then!"

Her mind suddenly saw McGill in a killing rage, the change on him fully. "I should go. My husband will wonder about me."

The smile dissolved from his lips. "Ye dinna hae to leave on my account, my lady."

"Please, call me Melissa."

Like day breaking over the hills, the smile flashed back to his face. "Melissa." He seemed to taste the name, and like the flavor. "What a bonny name."

"Thank you." She thought hard and fast. She was effectively setting herself up for pain and signing Duncan's death warrant. But she couldn't seem to stop herself. She liked this man, his simple openness and casual manner, but nothing could ever be between them. She knew that full well, but she wanted to be close to him.

"No thanks are needed." He stared into her eyes for a moment. "Come with me, lassie." He stood and took her hand again, walking across the square and down an alley.

He stopped and turned to face her, only inches away.

Duncan seemed to debate with himself for a moment. His eyes sparkled with decision. "If ye say no, I'll walk away now, but I want to kiss ye."

She blinked, feeling off balance. "What?"

"I'll take that as a yes."

He put his hands gently on her shoulders and pulled her to him. As he leaned over to reach her lips, Melissa again caught the scent of clean, work gleaned sweat on his body. His lips touched hers, and she twitched from the shockwaves roaring through her.

Melissa knew she should pull away and run, run back to the carriage and return to the castle, never to leave again. Instead, she put her arms around Duncan's neck, pulling his face tighter to hers as her tongue darted into his mouth.

The flavor of the warm, fresh bread earlier had been delicious, but the taste of his lips was some order of magnitude better, driving her desires to heights she had never known before. Very different from the feelings of the past with McGill and other vampires, and different from the other mortals she kissed, Duncan felt somehow right in her arms. And his arms felt delightful around her.

His hands moved slowly up and down her back as they kissed. It was a tender embrace instead of the frightful clawing of the vampire and the horny clutching of mortals. The gentleness of his touch told her that all she needed to do was say one word, and he would stop, even if he would need to impale himself on a sword to do so.

Duncan lifted her and walked slowly down the alley, her feet dangling in the air as their kiss continued. At the end of the buildings was a small area of scrabbled grass straining to survive in the rough ground. He lowered her slowly to the dirt, and then lay down beside her.

He was silent, but his eyes spoke volumes. In their hazel depths, she saw something new and different, something she once thought she saw in the eyes of a monster who stalked the temples of Karnac. She'd been mistaken all those centuries ago. She'd seen only bloodlust in the eyes of a vampire.

In Duncan's eyes, she saw love.

He deftly undid the ties of her blouse and exposed her breasts to the warm air. Even though warm, the excitement hardened her nipples to jutting buds and caused a spreading heat through her body.

Kneeling beside her, Duncan pulled down his pants, and his cock, long and hard, poked out at her, waiting to enter her. Spreading her legs, he moved to hover above her.

He lowered himself and eased his cock into her cunt, wet and dripping with desire for him. His thrusts were long and slow, first filling and then emptying her. With each stroke, she trembled and a sigh passed her lips. Perhaps it was the risk of being caught in the act by the townspeople, or even her guards, but she felt excitement she'd never known before building in her. Maybe, she thought, it wasn't the situation at all that excited, but Duncan himself.

She'd never had sex like this before. In the mortal world, women were not much more than property and were treated as a receptacle for the man's seed. In the dark world of the vampire, it was pure animal lust and reactions.

Duncan's gaze never left hers as he rocked slowly back and forth, his cock sliding in time with the motion. His thrusting came firm and sure, but not rough or abusive. He touched her with warmth and caring. Like dawn breaking through the darkness of the nightmare of her reality, she knew Duncan was not having sex with her. He was making love to her, and she was making love to him.

With other mortal men, she'd had to control the change to avoid killing the man atop her. Now, she felt no such need. The change didn't come to her, and she reveled that enough of the humanity remained inside to let her enjoy the contact with Duncan as a woman.

Unexpectedly, her body tensed in climax. Knowing people shopped nearby, she clenched her teeth on the scream that tried to escape when the fitful tremors hit her. Melissa flexed her hips against his, arching her back high in the air to gain just a little more penetration of his hardness into her.

His thrusts took on a renewed intensity, and she saw the lovely hazel eyes glaze. He suddenly gave a mighty shove that nearly knocked the breath from her, and his hot seed exploded deep inside of her cunt as Duncan grunted nonsense. His body jerked and twitched as he pushed for just a fraction of an inch deeper entry into her. Duncan's arms squeezed her tightly, maybe even tight enough to hurt a mortal woman, but she felt no pain in his passionate embrace, only love and desire.

He guickly rolled from atop her and, leaning over her, kissed her lips softly, almost like the touch of the wings of a butterfly.

In an instant, the moment was gone, replaced by the terror that was reality for her and all other vampires. She brushed her hand across his chin, the fine stubble of beard tickling her fingertips. "Duncan, I have to go."

"No, lassie, ye dinna hae to."

"You don't understand." She pulled her clothing about her and climbed to her knees. He kneeled before her. "I'm sorry, but I have to go." She touched her lips to his and ran for the carriage as she fastened her blouse.

Brother Bryce looked like he'd swallowed a frog. Duncan thought that, from the way the priest kept swilling down more ale, the frog might be trying to

climb back out again. Then again, after listening to Gilroy's tale, the priest's reaction was understandable.

Bryce swallowed a gulp of ale and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his robe. "Gilroy, ye actually asked the man if he's sooder folley?" It was amusing to Duncan that every time the words sooder folley hit the air, the priest crossed himself.

"Aye, and he dinna deny it."

Duncan sighed. "But he dinna admit it, either."

"Nay, but that's as good as an admission." Gilroy smiled, his eyes twinkling.

Duncan wondered if his friend thought he'd managed a major coup for the village. "Nay, 'tis not. Ye're lucky he dinna hae the guards string ye up from the beams or toss ye from the ramparts."

"Sooder folley are naught to play with." Bryce crossed himself again. "This is a serious matter."

"Aye, it is." Duncan couldn't resist poking the priest's nerves just a little. "And one for the Church, too."

"What?" Brother Bryce's frog must have kicked him, because his eyes bugged out, and he looked like he couldn't breathe.

Gilroy nodded enthusiastically and seriously. "Duncan's right! This nest of sooder folley is far too much for simple men like us to deal with. We need the power of Christ on our side!"

The reverend grabbed Duncan's mug and swallowed the contents in one lift. Beer spattered from his mouth when he gasped. "What?"

Duncan managed to keep the laugh crawling up his throat in check. Not smiling was harder. "Gilroy's right, Brother. We need God's own help."

"What?"

Duncan was about to let the priest off the hook when four soldiers came into the pub. He watched them as they spoke to the barman for a moment. The barman pointed toward the table where he, Gilroy, and Brother Bryce sat. One of the soldiers tossed the barman a coin, and the group headed to the table.

"Which of ye is Duncan Campbell?" The soldier's hand rested casually on the hilt of his sword.

"I'm called that."

"Lord McGill has sent for ye. Come now."

Duncan glanced quickly around the pub. He had friends among the patrons, men who would stand with him, but a bunch of unarmed farmers had little chance against four trained soldiers with swords. "Very well." He stood.

One of the soldiers studied Gilroy. "Are ye not the peasant who saw Lord McGill earlier today?"

Gilroy drew on some inner strength Duncan never even suspected lived within him. "Aye, I am."

The soldiers conversed for a moment. "Ye'd best come along, too. The lord will be keen to know ye associate with the likes of Campbell."

It seemed courage was in good supply this evening. Brother Bryce suddenly stood up. "And I'll be coming along, too."

The captain frowned. "Who are ye?"

"I'm their confessor."

The soldier chuckled. "Very well, then. All of ye can come!"

The soldiers didn't actually draw their swords as the group left the pub, but they were close to doing so. Duncan knew this had nothing to do with taxes or his fringe association with Wallace and Bruce. It was clearly about Melissa.

\* \* \* :

McGill sat beside her on the low dais in the Great Hall. Melissa really didn't want to be here, but she had learned that McGill didn't kill as many people if she attended the audiences.

She wanted to be back in Duncan's arms, and in his bed. Just thinking about him made her cunt wet and her heart thrill.

Instead, she was here listening to someone who needed to pay their taxes late because someone was sick, or who had to buy a new cow because the last one had gone missing, or who needed money from McGill to buy the new cow.

A few of the peasants were behind in their taxes, and she felt McGill reach out to their minds. Most of these people left the room babbling with terror.

One of the guards came to McGill and whispered something she couldn't hear. McGill smiled and nodded. Melissa didn't like the smile. It seemed to curl up his lips all the way to his ears, and his ears seemed to come to evil points.

The captain strode to the center of the hall. "Clear the room!" Soon, only McGill, she, and the captain remained.

McGill turned slightly toward her in his chair. "I understand you defied me today."

She swallowed. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. You left your escort and saw that man again." The smile returned. "This farmer, Duncan Campbell."

He knew all, and she saw no need to deny anything now. "Yes, that's right."

"And you fucked him."

"If you must know, I didn't. We made love."

Like lightning striking the tower, the change came on him. His claws closed tight around her throat, and she gasped for air. "I could inflict wounds so painful you would beg me to kill you."

She struggled and found enough air to speak. "Then do it, bastard."

The change tried to come, her instincts screaming for her to defend herself, but she fought it. Duncan showed her today that the mortal woman she once was still lived. Every time she allowed the vampire to leap forth, she knew she would lose a little more of her humanity.

McGill growled deep in his chest. "You are an ungrateful bitch! I should rend your head from your body. That hurts and takes a long time to heal."

The captain stood calmly by, either enchanted or indifferent. He showed no surprise, shock, or terror at the scene before him.

The lack of air painted black spots in her vision, but Melissa didn't struggle. She wouldn't give McGill that satisfaction. She managed a dry, half choked laugh. "Do what you will, but you will never own me."

He released her, throwing her from the chair to the floor as he pushed her away. The change faded, and he looked mortal again. "I already do." McGill waved at the captain. "Send them in, and leave us alone."

As she regained her chair, the soldier bowed. "Yes, my lord." He opened the door and motioned to someone outside.

Duncan strode into the hall, his head high and shoulders square. Behind him came the scarecrow man she'd seen on her first day in the keep, his shoulders bent and hunched in on himself. In the rear was a dumpy little fat man in the robes of a priest, his beady eyes scanning the room for either danger or escape.

The captain closed the huge door as he left.

McGill lounged in his chair like some great cat, relaxed and sure of himself. The evil grin was gone, replaced by a practiced suavity that her dreams told her would form the stereotypical vampire in the future at someplace called Hollywood.

When he spoke, McGill didn't use the Scottish accent he so carefully cultivated. "So, you are Campbell." He nodded to the scarecrow. "And it is good to see you again so soon, McBarens." His easy smile faded a bit. "Tell me, Campbell, who is your fat pious friend?"

Duncan didn't bow or make any effort at undue respect, nor was he rude. "Yes, I'm Duncan Campbell, and I ken my friend Gilroy has met you already. This is Brother Bryce."

"Brother Bryce. It is so good to meet a God fearing man among these barbarians."

The scarecrow called Gilroy took half a step forward. "And so 'tis true, then. Ye both are sooder folley."

"What if we are? What can you three do about it?"

The priest spoke up, crossing himself quickly. "Ye are the devil's spawn, and the Lord will strike ye down!"

McGill laughed. "Please, control yourself, Brother. There is no need for you to worry yourself." He stood and took the two short steps from the dais to the stone floor. "Why cannot people just get along?"

Duncan stood tall, and his gaze flickered to Melissa. A small smile played over his face before he looked intently at McGill. "My friends think ye are sooder folley. As for me, I dinna know. Nor do I care. I wonder what hold ye have over the lass, though."

McGill chuckled, and she thought she heard a deep rumbling far down in his body hinting at the ferocious beast within. "Campbell, let us deal with first things first. You are here for two reasons. First, you owe me back taxes. I do not take well to people who fail to render unto me what is mine." He smiled. "Sorry, just a little quote that has not been written yet."

"I dinna care about that. Take your money."

"I plan to." The smile quivered a bit. "The other thing is that you need to stay away from my wife."

Duncan towered over McGill, standing at least a head taller and half again as broad. Melissa knew that didn't matter if McGill decided it didn't matter. Duncan glanced at her again. "I think that's for the lass to decide, not ye."

She wondered when the carnage would start. No one ever accused McGill of being patient, but trifling with Duncan and the others seemed to please him for now. "You have no idea, Campbell." He stepped to stand before Gilroy. "And so, McBarens, you still think I am sooder folley?"

"l do."

McGill nodded sadly. "What of you, holy man?"

"I believe there is a devilish evil here."

"The devil and your god have nothing to do with the matter."

"'Tis blasphemy ye speak!"

"Only if you believe in all of that nonsense."

The priest crossed himself again, and Gilroy hugged himself as he shivered.

"Leave them alone, McGill." Duncan cleared his throat. "This is between ye and me."

"Tell me, Campbell, do you believe this sooder folley business?" McGill nodded toward her. "And what of my lovely bride? Is she too sooder folley?"

"I care not."

McGill's eyes narrowed to slits, and his face wrinkled in a deep frown. "You do not care that you have lain with a vampire?"

She didn't see Duncan react in any way, and he held his tongue.

"So, no comments, my common friends?" McGill walked to the long table and sat on the edge. "Let me tell you a little secret. Melissa and I are both sooder folley." The evil grin returned. "Feel better now?"

Duncan smiled back into the grin. "Then prove it."

Her heart thudded in her chest. She'd known McGill more than long enough to know he wouldn't back down from such a challenge, no matter how much fun he was having with the three men.

As she watched, McGill changed, slowly since he was in no danger. The teeth lengthened and sharpened as they grew to part his lips. The steel grey eyes set in brilliant white shifted and flowed to black with round red iris and green slit pupils. His fingers hooked into claws tipped not with human nails, but with talons better fitting some terrifying bird of prey. The skin of his face and arms mottled and wrinkled into something closer to leather armor than living skin.

When he spoke, the low growling sound flowed from somewhere deep inside the small man. "How is this?"

The priest fell to his knees, crossing himself over and over again as he mumbled in Latin. The little fat man prepared to meet his fate. Melissa knew he should also prepare to meet his maker.

Gilroy only shivered. She could smell his fear, thick and palpable in the air. He, too, foresaw his death.

Duncan's only reaction was to look away from McGill and stare at her. His face looked sad, and the remarkable hazel eyes held a hint of pain.

He opened his mouth once, and then shut it again before he was able to speak. "Melissa, is it true?"

She couldn't look away from him, even though she wanted to. She considered bringing on the change to show him, but she remained in the human form. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"Nay, dinna be sorry, wee lass." Duncan smiled. "Ye may be sooder folley, but ye are a woman, too."

She couldn't believe the words he had just spoken, or more correctly, the meaning of them. He didn't care that she was a vampire. Somehow, he could overlook that detail.

McGill stood from the table and walked slowly toward Duncan. "This is all very touching, but the fact remains that you know who, or more correctly, what I am, and there is the small detail of your dalliance with my wife."

He grabbed Duncan's throat and lifted the larger man from the floor. Duncan flailed against him, but McGill held fast and laughed.

The scarecrow sprang to life. He grabbed a torch from the wall next to him and, screaming incoherently, charged at McGill. The flame smashed against McGill's head, and he dropped Duncan to the floor, where he lay gasping for breath and clutching his throat.

McGill whirled, snatching the torch from Gilroy's hands. Flames licked the side of his head where his hair burned. "You fool!"

He struck out with the torch at the same time as he grabbed Gilroy's arm and pulled fiercely. The flaming tip of the torch hit Gilroy's chest. Gilroy didn't scream when the torch shattered through his ribs, but he grunted like hit by a heavy blow. The flame had gone out, extinguished by the blood when the torch punched through the scarecrow's spine. No more sounds came from the man after the cracking noise of bones settled from the air.

McGill flung the lifeless man across the room where the body slammed against the wall and fell to the floor in a bloody pile. Duncan crawled weakly away from McGill as the priest looked on with his eyes wide and his mouth agape in shock at the scene unfolding before him.

Duncan had crawled a short distance from where he fell, and McGill walked toward him. "Now, where were we?" He patted at his hair to put out the fire.

The priest seemed to jolt out of his shock, and he moved quickly for such an overweight, half drunk man. Brother Bryce stood and pulled a large silver crucifix from inside his robe. He darted between McGill and Duncan, holding the cross in front of McGill's face.

"By the power of God, get thee gone, demon!"

McGill threw his hands up between his eyes and the crucifix, hissing like some insane serpent. He screamed in pain as he staggered back a few steps.

The priest took a step forward, seeming to draw strength from his god. "Be gone, devil's spawn!"

McGill chuckled, low and threatening. He dropped his hands and grinned, the fangs glittering in the firelight. "Pretty convincing act, right?"

The priest seemed to turn to a wet cloth. His arms dropped to his sides, and his mouth fell open. "What?"

McGill laughed again and reached to take the crucifix from Bryce's hand. "Do not put your trust in such trinkets, Brother. They will get you into deep shit every time." He tossed the cross, and it clattered loudly on the floor.

"What?"

"Oh, never mind." McGill turned away a little, and then spun back suddenly, his claws streaking across the fat stomach of the priest.

Eviscerated, Brother Bryce wrapped his arms around his belly, trying to keep his insides inside. "What?" He collapsed to the floor, blood spilling to cover the stones.

Duncan had gained some purchase and leaned on his hands and knees, coughing up blood, which splashed in bright red splatters on the floor.

McGill walked close to him, and then stopped. He looked up to where Melissa sat motionless, frozen by fear and terror, in her chair. "You see, my love? I told you this would happen. Are you happy now?" He waved his hand at the still gurgling body of the priest, and then to where the crumpled and broken corpse of Gilroy had landed against the wall. "These men did not have to die."

"You would have killed regardless." Tears streamed from her eyes, burning hot against her skin as they tracked down to her lips where their salty tang filled her mouth.

He sighed. "Yes, I would have, and so would you. We are what we are, and we must kill to eat, to live." He nodded at Duncan. "You know how I feel, but we could have saved this one, as a toy for you, or perhaps a pet. You'll always be mine, but I understand your needs and wants. But now..." His words trailed off, and he shrugged.

She took a deep breath. She hadn't the power to stop McGill. He would simply rip her limbs from her body and make her watch anyway. "At least don't let him suffer."

He nodded. "I can do that." He stepped closer to Duncan.

Duncan looked up at McGill as his hand sought the cross the priest had carried. He clutched it to his chest as McGill grabbed his head in both hands.

Lifting Duncan from the floor by his head, McGill squeezed. From where she sat, Melissa could see the pressure distorting the bones of Duncan's skull and the blood oozing from his eyes, ears, and nose.

McGill didn't smile now. Between the effort of crushing Duncan's head and lengthening of his fangs, his mouth was partly open, and she could hear his breathing raspy with the fight.

Duncan suddenly moved, his hands snapping up and out, the cross held like a dagger. He swung down, his big muscles flexing with the effort, and plunged the long end of the crucifix deep into McGill's face, hitting in his nose. The cross buried itself to the bar before stopping.

McGill's reaction was both sudden and unexpected. He screamed, clawing at his face and the silver cross sticking out from his nose. He whirled wildly, legs flailing, as he staggered around the room. "You fool! What have you done to me?"

But Duncan didn't answer. He fell to the floor, blood streaming from every opening of his head.

Melissa stared as McGill wailed. He managed to grip the cross and pull it from his face, and it again clattered on the stones of the floor. He stopped his mad dance near the window. He glared at her, a great hole in the center of his face and blood covering him.

"You have destroyed us both, my love." His voice held an unnatural calm. "I am killed."

She couldn't stop the small smile from coming to her lips. "For that, I'm happy."

"Fuck you." McGill altered his form to that of a bird, and flew out of the window.

Melissa had never mastered that skill.

As if some invisible bond had been cut, she dashed to Duncan's side. Blood covered his face, and his head had an odd shape from McGill's assault.

She kneeled beside him and cradled his head in her arms. He still breathed, rapid and ragged, and his heart beat quickly in his chest.

Melissa brushed the sandy red hair from his face. "Rest, Duncan."

His eyes flickered a few times, and then opened. "Ye're still here."

"Yes." She smiled down into his face. "And McGill is gone."

"Aye." He coughed, and blood foamed in his mouth. "And what do we do now?"

She knew the answer, but that didn't mean she liked it. "I can't stay here."

"I ken that, and you know I canna leave." He coughed again, wincing with the pain. "If I even live."

"You'll live, my precious." She sighed. "I know."

"So?"

"I'll get you home, and then I'll leave."

"Melissa." He paused for a moment, the remarkable hazel eyes smiling at her despite the blood stains tinting the whites. "Melissa, no matter what ye may or may not be, I love ye."

"I'll never forget you, Duncan."

He chuckled softly. "Never is a long time."

"I've got a long time."

\* \* \* \*

## Scotland, Present Day

She stood on the highest remaining point of the castle and looked out over the countryside. Her gaze came to rest on the small town that now occupied the site of the village. She traced the remains of the old Roman road that led to the castle past the spot where a farmer called Duncan Campbell once tended his grain.

She wanted to find his grave, but none of the sites in the old churchyard were marked. Elektra longed to cry over his bones.

Instead, she stood there crying over the entire scene. The passion, the death, and the lost love all made her cry.

She hadn't seen McGill since she had learned to escape her body and live inside others. She wondered where he might be now. In spite of the theories, the silver hadn't killed him. Maybe he hadn't gotten enough of it, or maybe it just hadn't worked.

A shame, that.

Elektra could still see Duncan's eyes in her mind. He hadn't cared what she was. He had loved her just the same.

When she peeked out through the other's eyes and saw this man, this Roland, that she had married, she saw the same look in his eyes. This man, despite his faults and deficiencies, loved Valerie and would die for her, just as Duncan had been willing to die seven hundred years ago for her.

Yes, she thought, Valerie has chosen well. Roland wouldn't care, either.

\* \* \* :

Valerie stood staring out over the landscape from the castle. Roland didn't want to startle her. They were far up on the old walls, and there was no railing.

"Hi, baby."

She turned and smiled. "Hi, yourself."

As he neared, he noticed her eyes were red and puffy. "Have you been crying?"

She frowned and wiped at her eyes. "It looks that way, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. Everything OK?"

"Just fine. I didn't know I was crying." She laughed and flipped her shimmering blonde hair over her shoulder. The motion always grabbed his total attention.

"Just as long as you're all right." He looked out over the walls to the town in the valley. "This is one pretty place."

"Yes, it is." She snuggled up to his side and he put his arm around her shoulders. "Maybe we should move here."

"Yeah, right! You think we have a long commute now."

"That's true."

They stood watching the fluffy clouds drift across the sky. Now that the rains had passed for the day, only a few clumps of cottony white drifted in the blue sky, and Roland remembered all the times he and Valerie had made love on the mountaintop back home. There the clouds were tainted by the smog of L.A. only forty miles distant, but here in the clean highlands of Scotland, the clouds held the bright white of something pure and virginal. A noise behind him made Roland turn. Stanley Markinson stood watching them.

He smiled. "Pardon the intrusion. It is nice to see two people so very different and yet so very much in love."

Maybe it was that Stanley never used contractions that made him seem odd. Roland laughed a little. "I guess we are pretty different."

Valerie stared intently at the author.

Stanley's smile faded a little. "Yes. Maybe even more than you know."

## **About the Author**

Melodee Aaron was born and raised in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri where she spent many long hours on the front porch of her great-grandmo	
buse as the old woman practiced the ancient art of storytelling. Her life having spanned the time from before cars and airplanes all the way through	
eing men walking on the moon, "Grammy" had a unique perspective. Her stories blended old-time values with modern life in a way that made the ories and the characters come to life.	
ones and the ordinates some to the.	

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Melodee knew, even as a child, that she too wanted to tell stories.