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Margaret Carter



VIRGIN BLOOD

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MARGARET L. CARTER

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Edited by *Jennifer Martin*

Cover Art by *Christine Clavel*

Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. VIRGIN BLOOD has been rated HARD R, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

Chapter 1

When the moon rose above the trees, she leaned out the open window to await the call. After answering that summons at every full and new moon in the five years since her monthly flow began, she fell into the pattern automatically.

As always, Mother Selene's voice floated up to the window. "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair."

Nude except for her loose gown of white silk, Rapunzel ran her fingers through her waist-length, honey-blond hair and let the tresses flow over the windowsill. Mother Selene spoke one of the arcane words that instantly evaporated from Rapunzel's mind, syllables only a mage's thoughts could grasp. Ripples of energy coursed through her and pierced her scalp like fingernails probing her skull. The hair blossomed into a net of shimmering gold that spread over the stone walls of the tower from the bedchamber window all the way to the ground. Vibrations tingled along the strands. The witch swarmed up the net like a spider ascending a web.

None of this magic alarmed Rapunzel or even interested her very much. She had seen it too often. Having no gift for magecraft herself, or so Mother Selene assured her, she accepted her role as handmaiden to her guardian. Once inside the chamber, Mother Selene muttered a second word, which restored Rapunzel's hair to its ordinary state. Silently, the witch led the way up the spiral staircase to the roof of the tower.

The circular platform at the top, surrounded by a wall of about waist height, had a pentagram painted on the floor, with symbols inside the star that made Rapunzel's eyes blur if she stared too steadily at them. Needing no direction, she took her place at one point of the diagram, while Mother Selene stepped into position opposite her. The witch, robed in crimson, wore her ceremonial silver

athame in a cincture at her waist. Her pale hair grew luxuriantly to her shoulders, with her unlined face giving no clue to her age. Her eyes looked as cold as shards of blue ice. Her appearance had not changed since Rapunzel's earliest memories.

A cool night wind swirled around Rapunzel's bare feet and rustled her gown. Shivers ran up her arms and legs. Mother Selene drew the silver dagger and extended it over the circle inscribed in the center of the pentagram. Rapunzel stretched out her right arm, baring her wrist. The dagger's point nicked the skin. A few drops of blood fell on the circle.

The witch chanted the words, whisked away from Rapunzel's thoughts the moment they touched her ears. At once the familiar sparks danced over her body, encircling both her and her guardian in a blue-green aura. The magic tugged at the roots of her veins and nerves. Her skin prickled, and her hair fanned behind her as if swept by an otherworldly wind. Her nipples hardened, rubbing against the fabric of her robe. She resisted the impulse to clasp her hands to her breasts.

Behind the rhythm of the witch's voice, a clear chime like silver on crystal echoed through the drone of the chanting. Rapunzel felt an icy needle pierce her chest. A shudder racked her. She had never sensed any such interruption to the ritual before.

Mother Selene broke off as if she, too, had felt the intrusion. Shaking her head, though, she immediately resumed the incantation.

The circle on the floor glowed blue. It melted from stone to the rippling surface of a pool. Along with the witch, Rapunzel gazed into its depths. As usual, she saw nothing but the reflection of starlight and moonlight. Mother Selene whispered questions in an unknown language and paused as if waiting for answers. Whatever answers she saw in the pool of light seemed to please her. At last a cascade of azure light fountained from the pool to flow up her outstretched

arms and over her body. The witch purred as if the light caressed her. Rapunzel felt herself floating in dreamy languor. She seemed to drift among the stars like a leaf blown from its twig. She had no idea how much time passed before Mother Selene touched her shoulder to recall her to awareness.

The "pool" had reverted to a lifeless pattern on stone. Mother Selene murmured a phrase that stopped the bleeding from Rapunzel's wrist. "Well done, my child. Come along."

They descended the stairs to the bedchamber. Looking out the window, Rapunzel saw two covered baskets, each attached to a coil of rope. The witch spoke her magical summons, and each rope, in turn, floated up to the window to be reeled in. Rapunzel didn't hurry to rummage through the baskets, since she knew they contained the usual fresh fruits, bread, and other necessities to supply her for the coming fortnight.

"Is there anything else you'd like me to bring next time, dear?" Mother Selene asked with her chilly smile. "New books or music?"

Rapunzel glanced at her harp in the corner. She still hadn't finished mastering the last folio of sheet music. "No, thank you. I'm content." By now she knew it would be useless to ask for her real wants. *Teach me some of your magic. Or, I want to leave this tower and explore the world.*

Mother Selene didn't linger. It had been years since she had made any pretense that she and her ward got pleasure from each other's company. Still, as Rapunzel fetched the empty baskets from the previous visit, she almost wished she could think of a topic to detain her guardian for a few minutes. Talking to the witch would be more interesting than talking to herself or the sparrows she sometime lured to the window with crumbs.

After giving her a cool kiss on the cheek, Mother Selene spoke the words that transformed Rapunzel's hair once again into a shimmering net of gold. She descended to the ground, reversed the magic, and got into her waiting carriage,

drawn by a single horse. A word of command, with no need for a hand on the reins, spurred the animal into motion. Rapunzel watched until the carriage disappeared into the woods.

Tired from her role in the ceremony, even though it drained only a few drops of her blood, she hung her ritual gown in the wardrobe and lay down, naked, on the bed. The breeze from the open window caressed her flesh, still warm from the magical energies. Her palms grazed her nipples, then stroked down over her chest and stomach to her thighs. Heat pooled between her legs. She let her eyes drift shut.

Abruptly a voice broke into her half-dreaming state. "Rapunzel, Rapunzel!"

Her eyes snapped open. "Mother Selene?" No, the witch would have no reason to return. And the voice was a stranger's. A deep voice that reverberated through Rapunzel like the peal of a huge bell.

"Who's there?" she whispered. No one else ever came near the tower.

The voice called her again. "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, answer me!"

She snatched her dressing gown from a chair by the bed and shrugged into it. She rushed to the window and looked down.

A tall, cloaked figure stood there, taller even than the witch, who towered over Rapunzel. It pushed back the hood of the cloak and stared up at her. Its eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

A man!

He flashed a smile. "Lovely Rapunzel, let me come up to you."

"How do you know my name?" she called down.

"I overheard the witch speaking to you. May I come up?"

She wrapped her arms around herself. "You can't, unless you have magic like hers. Do you?"

"Not exactly, but I can reach your window if you're willing. You have to invite me."

Mother Selene's warnings raced through her mind. The outside world was not safe for young women. Rapunzel was cloistered here for her own protection. Men, especially, were little more than wild beasts on two legs. On the other side of the question, a flutter in the pit of Rapunzel's stomach argued in the man's favor. She told herself the excitement came from meeting someone new after all this time. She would risk any number of phantom hazards for a few hours of conversation with this stranger.

"Very well, I invite you. Come in."

The man spread his cloak. It swirled around him like a windblown cloud. A second later, it shrank inward, and his body with it. Human limbs became wings. A huge, ghost-white owl soared up and flew in circles just outside the window.

Rapunzel's breath caught in her throat. She backed away, one hand pressed to her mouth, the other to her pounding heart. The bird swooped in through the open shutters. It expanded to a column of dark mist, then shifted to man-shape.

She backed up farther and collapsed onto the bed, where she sat, gaping at him. He unfastened his cloak and flung it aside. With an amused arch of his black eyebrows, he said, "Have you never seen a man before?"

The faint mockery in his tone replaced some of her alarm with indignation. "Of course I have, when I was a child. But they were servants and tradesmen. None of them changed into birds."

Taking a seat in the bedside chair, he stretched his legs out and folded his arms. "You haven't always lived in this tower, then?"

"No, Mother Selene brought me here when I was thirteen." *When I became a woman.* "Before that, we lived in her mansion in the city." She surveyed her visitor. He wore black trousers with a lace-trimmed, white shirt, open at the neck. His dark hair curled in waves to just below his ears. His face, in contrast,

was as marble-pale as the witch's. His eyes glowed in the darkness of the bedroom, with a glint of crimson at their centers. "Are you a wizard?" she asked.

"As I said, not exactly."

"Then what brings you here?"

"You did, lovely Rapunzel. I was traveling through the forest, and your blood called to me. Your sweet, virgin blood. Like silver chimes ringing in my head."

She felt a stiletto of ice pierce her heart, just as she had during the ritual. Was it too late to eject this stranger from her refuge? Shivers danced over her body, and her nipples peaked again. "What do you mean?" she whispered.

"I'm no magician, not in the way you understand, but I can't help sensing the power of blood magic. And the fragrance of your blood ravished me."

"Blood magic." Rapunzel shook her head in bewilderment. "Yes, Mother Selene uses my blood in her ceremonies. But I never knew it was so powerful."

"Doubtless you are very valuable to her. Is she really your mother?"

"No, my parents didn't want me. They sold me to her when I was a baby."

"Or so she told you."

The skepticism in his voice irritated her. "She gives me everything I could possibly need. My real parents were poor. They could never have given me all this. Why should I doubt her goodness?"

He spread his hands to indicate the chamber walls. "She keeps you locked in this tower, doesn't she?"

"For my own protection." She frowned to hear the stranger echo the thoughts she had tried so often to suppress. "The outside world isn't safe for maidens."

"What hazards does she claim to protect you from?" The man stepped to the bedside and loomed over her. "Hazards like me?"

"Men." Rapunzel clutched her robe shut at the neckline. His voice made knots in her stomach, and his eyes glowed hotter the closer he crept. "She's guarding me from men."

He laughed softly. "She's guarding your precious maidenhead. Without your virginity, your blood would become useless for the rituals. But not for me." His cool fingers brushed her hair back from her forehead. She flinched. "Don't be afraid, golden Rapunzel. Haven't you wondered exactly what this danger from men consists of?"

Almost against her will, she nodded. When he smoothed her hair again, her insides churned. "You're no ordinary man," she whispered.

"No." He smiled broader than he had before, showing teeth that gleamed with the sharpness of a wolf's. "But I can demonstrate those *dangers* for you, and more besides."

"What do you want?" Her voice quavered.

He bent over her to flick her earlobe with his tongue. "To taste you. To sip your nectar."

Though she had no idea what he meant, the words roused a flutter inside her that held more delight than fear. "Will it hurt?"

"Oh, no. Does this hurt?" He pried her fingers loose from the robe and folded it open, then trailed one finger down the hollow of her throat to the spot between her breasts.

Her skin tingled, and her nipples tightened. "No," she breathed.

"This?" He ran his fingers through her hair, swept it up from her shoulders, and kissed the nape of her neck. Chills cascaded down her spine. "Or this?" His lips nibbled a path along her jawline to her mouth.

She gasped, and he captured her open mouth with his own. His tongue invaded her to explore the inside of her lips. She extended her own tongue to

sample the hot tip of his. Skimming his teeth, she felt a momentary sting. "Oh!" She pulled back.

The crimson glow of his eyes impaled her. "Just as I expected. You taste intoxicating. May I continue the demonstration?"

She trembled at the sight of those teeth that could probably rip her open in one quick bite. The coil of heat in the center of her body, though, made her reckless. "I don't even know your name." Even while she protested, she let the robe fall open and reclined on the pillow.

"Call me Alaric." He swept his palms over her shoulders and down to her breasts, which already ached. She moaned when his hands skipped lightly over her bosom to her waist, then up again without lingering. Grabbing his wrists, she tried to pull his hands from her shoulders back to her breasts. He chuckled. "In time, my love."

He leaned over her and sampled her lips again. Her tongue probed, inviting him to thrust deeper into her mouth. Trapping her legs under one of his, Alaric cupped her left breast and teased the nipple with his thumb. An almost unbearable tingling spread from that spot to the opposite nipple, then over her whole body.

"Alaric, please!" she murmured against the burning of his lips.

"If you beg that way," he growled into the curve of her neck, "you'll make me too thirsty to wait."

"Wait for what?" Hot liquid pooled between her thighs. She felt an urge to arch her hips, but his leg held her prisoner.

"You'll see. Soon." His tongue flickered like a flame across her throat, down the center of her chest, and over to one taut peak. When the wet tip swirled around the nipple, she cried out and writhed under him. While he licked that breast, he fondled the other, letting his palm graze its nipple just enough to drive her into delirium.

"More, please!" She hardly knew what she wanted, except that the tender place between her legs throbbed more urgently than it ever had after the moon magic.

Alaric rose up, evoking a cry of protest from her when the night air wafted over her bare flesh. He tore off his shirt and lay across her. "I need to feel your heat on my skin," he said before his mouth seized hers once more. Her breasts ached and tingled even more intensely, squeezed against his hard, cool chest.

His hand crept down the front of her body. When it reached the curls at the apex of her legs, fresh heat welled up there. She spread her thighs, moaning desperate pleas into his mouth. He dipped into her wetness. She gasped at the sensation of his fingers stroking back and forth between the pulsing folds. Not even in the restless dreams that often followed the rituals had she felt such a thrill.

His mouth traveled from hers to her throat. She felt a sting there, but it didn't feel like pain. Instead, it shot from her neck through her breasts all the way down, making her quiver with more intense need. The tiny nubbin between her thighs twitched. Somehow Alaric seemed to sense its ache. His thumb skimmed over it, making Rapunzel arch her hips in wordless pleading. Whimpers escaped from her lips as he rubbed the swelling bud. It thickened, tingled, and vibrated. Her senses gathered to a single, fiery point at that spot. She convulsed, almost shaking Alaric off her, but still dimly aware of his mouth fastened to her throat. Her whole being seemed to flow into him at the moment of ecstasy.

Drained, shaking, she clung to him until he raised his head to gaze down at her. In the moonlight she glimpsed dark moisture around his mouth. He licked it away with a catlike swirl of his tongue.

"My blood," she whispered. "You drank my blood."

"I told you it called me. And it is sweeter than I even imagined." He stroked her hair. "And it didn't hurt, did it?"

"Oh, no," she sighed. "Is that the whole danger my guardian warned me about?"

He laughed. "That is only the beginning. May I visit tomorrow night for another demonstration?" He stood up to shrug into his shirt and draped the cloak around his shoulders.

Rapunzel braced herself on one elbow, hardly able to gather the energy to move that far. "Not until tomorrow?"

"You need rest, my sweet." He kissed her on the forehead. "Until tomorrow night." He wrapped the cloak around himself, contracted to a swirl of black fog, transformed into bird shape, and flew out the window.

Rapunzel lay back with a shuddering sigh and drifted into sleep.

Chapter 2

The next day she wondered whether the whole visit had been a dream. The tangled sheets hinted otherwise, though, and when she looked into the mirror, she saw a tiny scratch on her neck. She rubbed the wound. It felt faintly sore but didn't really hurt. In fact, touching it stirred a tickle between her legs. Blushing at the memories that flooded her with that sensation, she hurried downstairs, past her parlor and dining nook, to the lowest level of the tower.

There, a garden of shrubs and flowers, designed to bloom through most of the year, grew in the sunlight that shone through the lattice-covered windows. A well supplied all the water Rapunzel needed. As on every other morning, she used the bucket to scoop water into a tub beside the well. Magic infused in the construction of the tub caused it to warm the water to the precise temperature comfortable for her bath. Sometime after she'd finished (she never saw the process) the used water vanished. The same kind of magic kept dishes, floors, and clothes clean, emptied her chamber pot, and, in winter, disposed of ashes from the fireplaces.

Sometimes she wished the magic didn't make all dirt vanish without a human touch. She had little enough to occupy her time as it was. After bathing and dressing, she ascended to the second level. Here, too, latticework covered the windows. In the past she had accepted Mother Selene's explanation that the barriers guarded against forest-dwelling outlaws who might try to break in. Now it dawned on Rapunzel that the lattice also served to keep her from running away. She had never thought of her doorless tower as a prison before. Now its solitude seemed just that, rather than the refuge she had always been taught to call it.

She lit a fire to boil water for tea and porridge, one task the magic didn't perform. After breakfast, consisting of the porridge and a peach from the basket delivered the night before, she wandered around the room taking books off the shelves, opening and closing them, unable to settle down. The pictures, in colors brighter than life, moved when she focused on them. Usually, the miniature scenes kept her entertained for hours. Today, though, even a sea monster sinking a ship in one of the newest books failed to hold her attention. She picked up her embroidery, only to prick her finger and narrowly escape dripping blood on the white linen. Sucking the needle wound, she remembered Alaric's mouth at her throat and blushed hotly.

At last she walked up to the third floor, her bedchamber, and tried to distract herself with the harp. Only love ballads flowed from her mind through her hands to the strings. She got up from the harp, shaking her head at her own infatuation. She might as well be one of those imprisoned princesses in the tales, mooning around while waiting for her prince to rescue her. Would Alaric be the prince to carry her off to freedom?

How could he? His magic of transformation into a bird wouldn't let her fly away, too.

She gazed out the window over the unbroken sea of green treetops that faded into mist at the horizon. Where had he come from? Where had he gone for the day? Could he find shelter in that untamed forest?

* * * * *

When night fell, she lit a single lamp on the bedside table and stared out that same window. The moon, waning from full, cast its pale light on the clearing at the foot of the tower. She hadn't long to wait before Alaric's darkly cloaked figure stepped out of the woods.

"Rapunzel, let me in!"

"Yes, hurry, come up!" The sound of his voice chased away her shame and annoyance with herself for yearning after him all day. Joy at his return erased all doubts. A delicious shiver coursed over her body while she watched him change size and shift into owl form.

The bird soared to the window and swooped inside. He had scarcely solidified into man shape before she threw herself into his arms. "You promised more," she murmured into the lace of his shirt. "Show me."

His chest vibrated with something between a laugh and a purr. "All in time, my golden one." His hands swept from her hair down her back to the curve of her hips, over and over, until she rubbed against him like a cat.

After a pause to shed his cloak and unfasten his shirt, he clasped her tightly and nuzzled her throat. "For the demonstration I promised, I have to taste your elixir first." Opening her loose robe, he hugged her so that she felt his cool skin against the heat of her breasts. Her nipples pebbled up. He insinuated one hand inside her robe and reached around to fondle her cleft from behind.

With a moan of impatience, she arched against him. His fingers crept between her legs. "Let me into your secret grotto."

"Yes, please!" She spread her thighs to invite a deeper probe.

"Like the dew of a summer night," he whispered. His tongue flickered over her neck.

Already she throbbed inside. When he stopped working at her slit, she whimpered in protest, but his hand quickly shifted to the front. The long middle fingers danced in and out of her eager flesh, while his thumb slid over the sensitive bud in the nest of hair.

"Ah," he sighed. "I feel your pearl glistening at my touch."

She rocked back and forth to the rhythm of his strokes. The tension grew to an unbearable tightness, aching to explode in release. Her whole body pulsed in tune with her heartbeat.

"I can hear your heart," he echoed her thoughts. "It intoxicates me." His teeth penetrated her throat. Her blood and her passion erupted together.

She clung to him, shaking, with only his arms holding her upright. When their ecstasy began to fade, he carried her to the bed. "Now that your essence fills me, I can perform the rest of the demonstration."

After stripping her of the robe, he peeled off his own shirt and trousers. She watched him in wonder. Between his thighs jutted a long column of flesh that tapered to a point. She reached out, daring to touch it with a fingertip. The strange organ twitched at the contact.

"As I said, I'm no wizard in the sense you understand." Alaric reclined next to her. "But I do have a rod of enchantment."

She tilted her head back to look into his teasing eyes. "Can you really work magic?"

He laughed. "Only the magic all lovers share."

"Then what is the purpose of this, this rod?" Again she gave it a tentative poke.

Growling, he caught her hand. "Not so fast. To cast the spell, it must enter your grotto, if you'll allow me."

At those words, a fresh gush of hot wetness pooled in her "grotto." Yet his rod looked so large. "Will it hurt?"

"I would never cause you pain." Easing her onto her back, he swept his hands from her shoulders over her breasts and stomach, down the insides of her legs, then upward in long, swirling strokes that made every inch of skin glow with heat. She felt herself melting, even though her inner muscles tightened with each pass of his hands. "Touch me now," he invited.

She clasped his rod. The shaft felt like ivory covered with satin. With a groan, he thrust into her grasp. "Now," he said, "let my rod into your sheath."

He knelt between her spread legs. Her hole pulsed with eagerness. In a single plunge, he buried himself to the hilt inside her. Still melting from his caresses, she felt no pain, only fullness. He rocked his hips, and she matched the rhythm. He withdrew almost completely. With a moan of protest, she arched her back to draw him deeper again. He glided in and out, tantalizing her passion-swollen button with each long, slow stroke. Molten heat spread from that spot to flow throughout her body.

Their pace quickened, until the frantic thrusting drove her to the heights again. Quivering on the verge, she clamped her legs around him. Her inner muscles clenched and throbbed while he spurted into her. Just as she began to slide down from that peak, she felt his teeth in her throat. The sting spurred her to yet another release.

Over and over, she spiraled higher and higher with him, scarcely pausing to catch breath before he made her soar again. When the time came for him to fly away, she had to clutch him to keep her tremulous legs from collapsing under her.

"Perhaps I've drunk too deeply. I should stay away for awhile."

"No, don't do that!"

"I can't risk being caught by the witch. There's no telling what she would do to you if she learned about our lovemaking."

"It's all right," Rapunzel said, still breathless in the aftermath of her satisfaction. "She won't—she doesn't come here every night. Only twice a month. Tomorrow is safe."

They shared a ravenous kiss before he shifted shape and left her just ahead of the dawn.

Chapter 3

Even before Alaric called to her the next evening, she saw his dark figure at the foot of the tower and begged him to come up. When he alighted in front of her and blurred from owl-shape to man-shape, she wrapped her arms around him and tugged him toward the bed.

Laughing softly, he drew her onto his lap. "Rapunzel, would you like me to show you a new kind of danger?"

She giggled. "Do you mean a new pleasure?"

He nuzzled her neck. "You've changed your mind fast enough about the witch's view of men."

A shadow fell across Rapunzel's delight. "Let's not talk about her. What is this new pleasure, or danger?"

"I want to prepare you first, if I may." He caressed the nape of her neck under her unbound hair.

Sighing, she leaned her head back against his hand. "How?"

"Let's begin by removing your clothes."

Her skin tingled at the words. Since she wore only a long nightgown, that preparation would be easy. She reached for the ribbons at her neck.

"Allow me." He pulled the first bow loose. His cool fingers made her flesh prickle. He followed up with a light kiss on the exposed hollow of her throat.

She gasped. He untied the second ribbon. His lips brushed her skin just above her breasts. Another ribbon. Now he could fold the bodice of the gown

open to expose her nipples. His hands cupped each breast and grazed the hardening peaks.

His mouth followed the path of his hands. When she clutched his arms, he slipped out of her grasp and moved down to slide his hands under the hem that reached to her ankles. Inch by inch, he eased the cloth up to expose her legs. His fingers crept up the inside of her calves, then her thighs. She writhed and arched her hips. When his hand reached the apex of her thighs, he didn't dip into the wet cavity but skimmed over the triangle of hair to fold the gown above her waist.

He planted a kiss on her navel, then pulled the gown the rest of the way over her head. Her impatient squirming almost got her tangled in the cloth.

"Alaric, please! I need—"

"So do I." He ran one fingertip from her throat to her navel. It felt like a searing brand. "Soon." He shrugged off the cloak and unfastened his shirt to pull it off.

Rapunzel tugged at the buttons of his trousers until at last they both lay naked side by side. His rod nudged her mound, but it wasn't completely stiff, and he made no move to enter. "Now I can show you that new pleasure," he said. With one fingernail he slashed a line across his chest. Blood oozed from the scratch. "Taste me." He drew her head toward him.

The excitement bubbling in her veins kept her from feeling repelled at the idea of drinking blood. She kissed each of his nipples in turn, exulting in their hardness and the groan he uttered when her tongue touched them. With his hand on the back of her head guiding her, she licked the thin wound.

His blood tasted like crisp, dry wine. It burned like brandy on her tongue and all the way down to her stomach. Ripples of pleasure undulated over her body. Her slit pulsed at the pressure of his shaft against her lower abdomen.

"Rapunzel, my golden one—" She felt a growl rumble in his chest. When she sucked on the scratch to stimulate the trickle of blood, he moaned as if transfixed by pain or pleasure. "Rapunzel, give me your hand," he begged in a strangled voice.

She stretched her arm to bring it within his reach. Lifting her hand to his mouth, he bit her wrist and sucked with frantic urgency. His tongue danced over her skin. A lightning bolt seemed to shoot up her arm and down to the pit of her stomach. Wet heat welled inside her.

She felt his rod growing hard. Draping one leg over his, she tried to roll onto her back without removing her mouth from his chest.

"Not yet," he whispered in between sips from her wrist. His other hand crept between their bodies and stroked her damp curls. "Let me polish your pearl first." His fingers circled the thick bud until her hips pumped uncontrollably. Then he found the swollen tip and settled into a steady "polishing" rhythm. After a few seconds the flood of ecstasy swept over her. The piquant flavor of his blood intoxicated her beyond anything she'd felt before.

His hips bucked, rubbing his shaft against her belly. "It needs—relief—now." He broke off their mutual blood-sipping and rolled her over to lie on top. Spreading her legs, she drew his rod into her sheath. He captured her mouth while she convulsed in release, and she tasted her own elixir on his lips.

"What did that mean?" she said when she recovered her breath. "Making me drink your blood?"

He kissed the top of her head. "It's like a marriage. Perhaps I should have told you first, but I couldn't bear the thought that you might refuse."

She leaned on one elbow to gaze into his glowing eyes. "Have you done that with many other girls?"

He laughed softly. "Never. Do you think I'm a polygamist?" He pulled her head onto his shoulder. "That sensation was incredible. I can't imagine having it

with anyone but you. Now that you've tasted my blood, we have a special bond. We can share dreams."

"Really? You mean you can get inside my dreams?" She wasn't sure how she felt about such intimacy.

"And I can bestow dreams upon you. Visions as real as life. You can travel with me in your sleep. Wouldn't you like to see what lies beyond this tower?"

"You know I would. It's what I want most." She thought of her fading memories of the outside world from childhood and the moving pictures in her books. Neither one quelled her discontent any longer.

"Then I'll give you what I can of that through our bond until the night comes when you're ready to leave with me."

"Leave?" She hadn't thought that far ahead. Alaric's visits seemed more like a dream than anything that could affect her waking life.

"Did you expect to spend the rest of your life here?"

The question dissipated the languid contentment left from their embrace. She sat up, wrapping her arms around her knees. "Mother Selene has never mentioned that."

"Why don't you ask her next time? I'll wager she'll evade the issue or become angry."

Rapunzel's heart chilled at the thought of making the witch angry. Yet didn't her foster mother owe her the truth about her own future? "I'll think about it."

"Meanwhile, we can travel together in visions. You'll see a bit of what you're missing. Tonight while you're sleeping, perhaps."

"Why not while you're with me?"

"I don't trust myself to break out of the trance in time," he said. "I don't want to be caught by the sun."

After he left, she lay awake until well past midnight, mulling over the doubts he'd stirred in her. Finally she drifted into sleep.

Some unmeasured time later, her eyes opened to find her chamber drenched in moonlight. She had never seen it so bright before, like lamplight, yet without the flickering and the shadows. A pearly glow filled the room.

Rapunzel threw back the sheet and sat up. Abruptly she realized she was not wearing her nightshift, nor was she sitting in a normal position. She seemed to be crouched on her feet. Glancing down at her breast, she saw white feathers. When she tried to stretch her arms, wings flapped instead.

I'm an owl. The idea didn't frighten her. In a dreamy daze, she realized this change must be one of the "visions" Alaric had promised.

She spread her wings and fluttered to the open window. Above the treetops a white bird with glowing eyes flew in wide circles. It swooped toward the window and greeted her with a ghostly "whoo" cry.

Alaric.

His voice spoke inside her head. *Fly with me.*

She stretched to her full wingspan and leaped out the window. A gust of wind caught and lifted her. Gliding on the currents, she followed the other owl over the forest. *Where are we going?*

We shall hunt. He led the way across the expanse of trees to a break in the foliage that showed a clearing far below. Rapunzel exulted in the wind rushing past her and ruffling her feathers. On the ground in the clearing she caught sight of small, pale shapes crawling through the undergrowth. Every object looked more distinct than the waning moon could account for, as if her owl form could use even the faintest glimmers of light.

Alaric spiraled downward, and she followed. When she got closer to the earth, her eyes picked out each leaf and blade of grass. She recognized the

creatures on the ground as field mice. Their squeaks of alarm pierced her ears. Her stomach cramped with hunger.

Watch. Alaric's circles tightened as he descended. He centered on one mouse in the middle of the clearing. In a steep dive he rushed down to snatch the animal in his talons. His beak stabbed the back of its neck. The tiny body went limp. The owl pecked a deeper wound in its belly and, instead of tearing it apart, sipped the blood.

Rapunzel chose her own target and dove toward it. The mice scattered in panic, and her strike missed. She pulled up with a screech of frustration.

Leaving his drained prey, Alaric flew up to join her. *The forest is full of game. We'll find your food elsewhere.*

They soared over the woods again. Rapunzel noticed isolated clusters of lights that suggested villages. In the distance sparkled larger clumps of light that could be towns or cities. Why hadn't she ever seen them from her tower window? On the other hand, it made sense that a dream landscape might not match the reality she knew.

Flying over the trees, she glimpsed deer and foxes, all too large for her to attack. Alaric led her to another clearing, where a family of rabbits crouched asleep under a bush. Her keen vision noted when their eyes opened and their ears perked up. Alaric dove toward them with a screech that frightened them into running. Rapunzel focused on one fleeing rabbit and flew straight at it. Her claws sank into the fur. It squealed in terror, and its muscles flexed her grip. She plucked the animal off the ground, circled the clearing, landed again, and drove her beak into the victim's spine.

Beside her, Alaric also had a catch in his talons. She watched him stab the other rabbit and feed on its blood. Encouraged, she impaled her own prey and tasted the red fluid that gushed from the wound. It filled and intoxicated her like

a rich wine. She drank until the flow subsided to a trickle. Her stomach felt pleasantly heavy with its warmth.

They launched into the air, flying on the wind for what felt like hours. She marveled at the brightness of the gibbous moon and the diamond sharpness of the stars. Finally they circled back toward the tower. Her wings still bore her weight with no fatigue. She almost wished she could do this every night.

Alaric must have picked up the thought, for he answered, *Vision flights take their toll on your strength, even if you don't feel it at present. Tomorrow you will need a long rest to recover.*

She flew around the tower in playful retreat, and he chased her. Catching up, he paced her so that his wings barely grazed hers. The brush of his feathers stirred an appetite for more than food or drink. Heat coiled in her loins. Alighting on the edge of the roof, she flapped her wings invitingly. He swooped down upon her.

Overshadowing her, he mounted her back. His beak grasped her neck, and he pressed against the opening beneath her tail. His wings beat the air, whipping up a wind that made her feathers bristle. A thrill rippled through her. She humped in time with his frenzied rubbing. When their release exploded together, both of them shrieked aloud.

Alaric nipped her gently in farewell and flew away. She glided to her window and hopped inside. The moment she landed on the floor, oblivion took her.

* * * * *

When she lay in his arms after their lovemaking the next time he visited, she described her dream. "But you know all about it, don't you? You were with me."

"Yes, in a way."

She rolled on her stomach and propped her chin on her fists to stare into his eyes. "Now you sound like Mother Selene. She never gives a straight answer about magic, either."

"I told you, I don't perform magic the same way she does."

"I know you're not a wizard," Rapunzel said. "If you were, you could cast a spell to whisk me away from here when I'm awake, not only in dreams. If you aren't a wizard, though, how do you work that dream magic?"

"It is part of what I am." He turned on his side and leaned on one elbow. "I didn't have to learn it as an apprentice or from books. I gained the ability when I became a creature of the night, like the power to fly in owl shape."

"You mean you haven't always been like this?"

He laughed. "Of course not. Do you think I'm some sort of demon? I used to be as human as you are."

"Then what happened?"

"I have to delve far into my memory to recall that. It was a very long time ago. Hundreds of years."

Her heart constricted. "How is that possible? You're young. You don't look much older than I do."

"The change stopped me from aging. Dear one, I died all those centuries ago."

Her heart congealed into a cold knot. She sat up and gazed at the candle glowing on the bedside table. "You can't be dead."

"I said I died," came his gentle reply. "I didn't stay dead." His fingers played with her unbound hair.

Shrugging off his touch, she said, "Tell me about it."

"I was a younger son of a minor lord. I've since learned that most revenants who survive long after their return from the grave are noble or at least wealthy."

"Why?"

"Because serfs and peasants can't pay for adequate shelter and protection. It's all too easy for their neighbors to unearth and destroy them."

Rapunzel felt sickened at the thought of anything hurting Alaric. "Destroy—how?"

"A wooden stake or silver weapon in the heart. Cutting off the head. Or the surest method, fire." He patted her hand. "Don't distress yourself. Nothing will happen to me. I've managed to survive all this time."

The coolness of his skin reminded her of his claim to have died. Moving her hand away, she said, "How does a person become one of the living dead? A curse from a sorcerer or a demon?"

"Possibly. I'm no scholar, to answer such questions. The commonest way is through the bite of another revenant."

"You mean I—"

"Only if you die of my feeding, or of any cause while the wounds remain unhealed."

"One of the living dead changed you, then?"

He got up and strode to the window, where he stared out at the moon. "My father gave a Christmas feast for the nobility and gentry of the district. A woman with flame-colored hair and milk-white skin appeared in the ballroom after dinner. No one knew her name or remembered seeing her before, yet my parents and older brothers made no move to challenge her. She behaved as if she had a right to walk among us. And she chose me as her partner in the dance."

"Chose you? Didn't you have any say in the matter?"

"It seemed not," he said with a wry smile. "One moment she was standing in front of me, gazing into my eyes. The next, I was leading her in time to the musicians' measure. I felt drunk, as if my head floated apart from my body. The

woman was as thin as a wraith, but though I normally preferred buxom ladies, I didn't find her unappealing. Quite the opposite. Every moment the pattern of the dance moved her out of my reach, I felt shrouded in darkness. She enthralled me."

Rapunzel's queasiness gave way to annoyance. "Enough of that. Never mind how thrilling she was. What happened next?"

He gave her a teasing smile. "Oh, you don't want to hear how I followed the stranger around like a lovesick boy for the rest of the night? Or how I escorted her to the sideboard, but she would accept nothing from me but a goblet of wine, which I never saw her drink? When the ball finally ended, I strolled outside with her and ordered a servant to summon her carriage. I looked around for my strange lady, and she was gone."

"You mean she vanished into thin air?"

"Not literally before my eyes, but she might as well have. I searched frantically and couldn't find her, nor did anyone remember seeing her leave. And I still didn't know her name."

"It's like an old tale," said Rapunzel. "She didn't drop a crystal slipper on the stairs, did she?"

He laughed. "No, but like the prince in the tale, I scoured the town and countryside for my mysterious beauty. None of my father's guests knew her or admitted inviting her. After two days of futile questioning, I gave up. On the third night, she visited me."

"I suspect you don't mean she arrived in a coach with footmen."

Alaric shook his head. "She came to me in a dream. At least, I thought it was a dream. She appeared in my bedchamber wearing the same forest green velvet dress she had worn at the ball. But her copper hair flowed loose instead of being elegantly coifed the way it had been when I'd danced with her. I tried to sit up, to speak. I couldn't move, as if I was chained to the bed and gagged."

"Could you have done that to me?" For the first time since the night they'd met, Rapunzel thought of him as a creature to be feared.

"I could, but I wouldn't. I wanted your free consent." The warmth in his voice sounded sincere.

"I'm glad."

"She glided to my bedside. Somehow her clothes melted away, leaving her white body naked in the moonlight. She turned down the covers and lay on top of me." His voice softened into a dreamy, distant tone. "She felt like ice, drawing the life out of me. But her lips burned my neck. A sting at my throat sent the most exquisite convulsion of pain and pleasure through—" He shook his head as if forcing himself back to the present. "Well, you don't need to hear that part. Hours seemed to pass, hours of passion that would have been impossible in waking life. Finally blackness closed over me."

"You mean she killed you?" She wasn't sure which disturbed her more to hear about, the woman's seducing him or murdering him.

He blinked. "What? No, not then. She wanted to prolong the enjoyment. I woke the next morning parched with thirst and so weak I could hardly stand. Food and drink revived me, though, and by evening I felt almost like myself. That night the 'dream' came again. I luxuriated in her embrace. After all, if it was only a phantom of my fevered brain, it couldn't be sinful."

"Did you think it might be?" Though Rapunzel had read about the rituals of the church, Mother Selene had, of course, never had her christened or instructed in religion.

With a bleak smile, he said, "Our local priest would certainly have said so. Consorting with a demon, for what else could she be, if she were real? By daylight I assured myself I'd only dreamed her visits, so I didn't have to settle the question of her nature."

"And by night?" Again she felt a prickle of jealousy over his fascination with the strange woman.

He sighed. "Her passion proved tireless, and under her spell, I kept pace with her—by night. During the day was a different matter. Before too long, though, my family couldn't help noticing my fatigue and loss of appetite. They called physicians, who bled me—for all the good that did on top of her feedings—and dosed me with foul potions. My health kept fading."

"Surely you must have known she'd caused the illness."

"No, she fogged my brain so that I didn't realize she was drinking from me. Anyway, as I said, I told myself she was only a dream. Finally my father gave up on physicians and summoned the priest. He prayed over me day after day. He heard my confession and brought me the Host daily, and at last I broke down and confessed my lustful dreams. He ordered me to recite hours of rosaries as penance and wear a crucifix to sleep."

"That didn't keep her away, did it?" By now Rapunzel knew how the story had to end.

He sighed. "It might have if my own will hadn't undermined its power. When she appeared that night, she saw the cross around my neck and bared her fangs in rage. The next moment, she cooed with honey sweetness again and asked with tears in her eyes if I'd ceased to love her. I protested my devotion. Then she said I had to prove it by taking off the cross. I'm sure it won't surprise you that I obeyed her."

Tingling at the memory of the passion Alaric always roused in her, Rapunzel could hardly blame him for responding the same way to his long-ago lover.

"Still assuring myself that she wasn't real, I discarded the holy symbol and embraced her. She must have grown tired of me, or perhaps she didn't want the risk of being unmasked, maybe even destroyed, by the priest. This time she fed

deeply and didn't bother to conceal the wound. I woke up the next morning too weak to move, with my pillow soaked in blood."

Rapunzel's stomach churned. "And then you—died?"

He nodded. "Though I didn't know it, of course. I received the last rites and fell into a swoon a few hours later. I woke in the dark. In a box." A visible shudder went through him.

She moved from the bed to stand beside him, putting her arm around his waist.

He drew her close. "Don't upset yourself, dear one. It was a very long time ago."

"But it must have been horrible."

"As I said, I didn't know I had died, only that I was trapped in a wooden chest. I screamed myself hoarse and kicked the sides and pounded the lid. My fists punched holes in the wood, and I tore at it until I'd made a gap large enough to escape through. That alone should have told me I had changed. No ordinary human strength could have broken out."

"Were you buried?" She forced out the words in a thready whisper.

"My family had a crypt. I recognized my surroundings as soon as my panic wore down to mere terror. Naturally, I thought I'd been entombed alive. I shouted for help, though with little hope that anyone would be close enough to hear. Then the door opened."

"Someone from your family freed you?"

"Hardly," he said with a dry laugh. "It was my lady. Her eyes glittered with contempt instead of passion. She explained what I'd become and told me to be grateful she'd stayed long enough to watch me rise, rather than abandoning me. She said she'd already waited longer than she planned and had almost lost

patience. You see, the time for resurrection varies from mere hours to several nights, for reasons unknown to me."

"So she stayed to help you?"

"She gave little enough help. She had no interest in her victims once they couldn't nourish her anymore. After she'd introduced me to the rudiments of this existence, she considered her duty finished. After all, why should she linger in the area and risk destruction for one more half-witted boy, as she put it?"

"How cruel!" The bitterness in his tone brought tears to Rapunzel's eyes.

"Don't be afraid, my love." He stroked her cheek. "If you ever become what I am, I won't let you suffer any such fate."

She leaned against him. "You must have dallied with many women over the years."

"Not this way. I visited them in dreams, and only two or three times each. I vowed I wouldn't treat any woman the way my dream lady ravished and abandoned me. To the end, I never even knew her name."

"What did you do when she left you? Go back to your family?"

"I knew better than that. They would have received me with sword, stake, and fire. By night I slipped into my old chambers to collect money and gems. They belonged to me, after all. It wasn't theft. I traveled far from home and finally settled near your forest. While hunting one night, I sensed the call of your blood."

She tilted her head back to gaze up at him. "That explains why you visited me the first time. Why have you kept returning? And why didn't you make me believe you're a dream?"

He rubbed her back in languid spirals. "Do I need a reason to fall in love with you?"

"Yes. Why me? I'm an ordinary girl."

Laughing, he kissed the top of her head. "Far from it! The witch has guarded you like a jewel in a golden casket. Because of your innocence, you welcomed me without fear. Few other women could do that. It was an entirely new experience for me, to feast on your love in full waking awareness. It enthralled me from the first time we embraced." His tone became more somber. "Now that you know the truth of my past, do you fear me?"

"Oh, no!" She wrapped her arms around him. "I love you."

"Dearest. My golden one." His voice sounded rough with suppressed tears. He bent to kiss her, cradling the back of her head in his palm. His tongue teased her lips apart.

Sighing, she welcomed the penetration and pressed her body tight against the full length of his. Liquid heat flowed through her. She stood on tiptoe to let his hardness nestle in the V of her hips.

With a shaky laugh, he broke off the kiss. "No more of that. Dawn grows near." He placed his open palm over her racing heart. "Rapunzel, sooner or later you'll escape from this prison. I promise that. And when you do, you'll meet other people. Men and women like yourself, ordinary, as you put it. You want that, don't you?"

"Of course. I remember a little of what it was like to talk to people besides Mother Selene. I'd love to be able to do that again and travel freely outside my own rooms. Even when we lived in the city, I couldn't do that. She didn't trust me out of her sight, even with my nursemaid. On our rare excursions beyond the walls of the mansion, Mother Selene escorted me herself, and never far or for long. I'd like to see all those things and people from my books."

"And so you shall, someday. But don't be surprised if these new experiences change your view of some things."

"What do you mean?" His shift in tone made her uneasy.

He held her at arm's length and gazed into her eyes. "The world is full of men. You might find one you like better. A warmblooded man who can walk in the sun and give you children."

"No! Don't say such things! I'll never stop loving you."

"You can't be sure of that until you've seen the outside world." Sadness shadowed his face. "Understand, my dear, if that happens, I won't keep you chained. If someone else can make you happier, I'll be glad for you."

"You won't! And I won't leave you, so stop talking about it." Tears clogged her throat and misted her eyes.

"Well, there's no need to worry about it now. Let's wait until you're actually free." He drew her head onto his chest and stroked her hair. "Meanwhile, there's a way you can sample the delights of that outside world."

"What do you mean?" She rubbed her face.

"Dream travel can lead to many possible destinations. You don't have to fly on owl wings to share it with me."

Chapter 4

She woke from sleep to the awareness that, once again, she wasn't truly awake. The silvery light flooded her chamber again. Alaric's voice rang in her head: *Are you ready to travel with me?*

Yes!

Then close your eyes.

She obeyed. A rush of wind invaded the room. Her breath caught in her throat. A cyclone lifted her from the bed and swept her with dizzying speed through a dark void.

The wind's howl ceased. Her head spinning, she felt a hard surface under her feet. An arm around her waist and a hand at her elbow kept her from toppling over. She opened her eyes.

Alaric stood beside her in an anteroom with wood-paneled walls and a marble floor. Out of the silence welled the music of stringed instruments and the chatter of voices. He wore evening clothes of crimson satin and velvet, with lace at the neck and cuffs. Looking down at herself, Rapunzel discovered she wore a gown of turquoise blue with layers of petticoats under a billowing skirt. She fingered the luxurious fabric in wonder. Instead of the languid weakness after Mother Selene's spells, she felt energized. "Where are we?"

"The people of darkness gather here one night in seven," said Alaric. "This is only an ordinary soiree, of course. We hold our grand convocations at the autumnal equinox, when the nights begin to lengthen, and at midwinter, the longest night of the year."

He donned a feathered mask in the shape of an owl's head. He handed her a smaller mask, trimmed with peacock feathers, which she put on. "Shall we dance, my lady?" He offered his arm.

She rested her hand on his arm the way the magical images in her books had demonstrated. He escorted her into the ballroom. Men and women thronged the room with its vaulted ceiling and polished floor. All except the servants who circulated with trays of goblets wore fantastic masks of birds and beasts, real and mythical. She noticed their sidelong glances at her and the pride on Alaric's face as he drew her closer to his side. The music swirled around her like a gentler version of the wind that had brought her here. Dazed, she surveyed the people glittering with jewels, the candles that glowed on the sideboards, wall sconces, and chandeliers, and the long tables set with golden punchbowls.

Alaric led her to the dance set forming in the center of the room. Only then did she glance to the right of the ballroom and realize one entire wall was covered by a floor-to-ceiling mirror. She gasped and clutched Alaric's arm. In the mirror she saw herself standing alone, holding onto empty air. The vast space looked vacant except for the servants with their trays. A noise hummed in her head, as if she were about to faint.

He turned her to face away from the mirror, smoothing her hair as if comforting a nervous kitten. His eyes glowed behind the owl mask. "Don't let that frighten you. It's merely a part of what we become when we pass from ordinary life into the night world."

The buzzing in her ears faded, and she became aware of the music again. Alaric swept her into the pattern of the dance. With his hand on her waist to guide her, she glided around the floor without a misstep. She wove through the figures, transferred from Alaric to the other men in the set, each one with icy fingers and eyes that gleamed crimson behind his mask. One man in the mask of a fox smiled at her through the gap in the false jaws to show his own fangs.

Lowering her eyes to hide a tremor of fear, or perhaps a quiver of arousal, she focused on the steps until another man took the place of the fox-headed one. Finally the music brought her back to her original partner.

When that dance ended, they paused at the edge of the room to watch the other guests. Rapunzel wondered how the dancers could move so gracefully in such a crowd. "I wouldn't have imagined there were this many of your kind. So many of the living dead," she said to Alaric.

"The dead far outnumber the living," he said. "Is it unbelievable that a fair number of those dead resent their status and rise to walk the earth again?"

"As spirits, maybe. After a lifetime with Mother Selene and her magic, I have no trouble believing in ghosts. But revenants with solid bodies, that's different."

"Actually, you won't often see them together in a large company like this. We're solitary creatures except for these weekly gatherings. But I did want to introduce you as my lady. My princess, to hark back to the granddams' tales."

"Does that mean my dress will turn into rags at midnight?" A laugh bubbled up at that image.

He smiled. "Our balls end at dawn, not midnight. Shall we try this new dance? They call it the waltz."

The string quartet played a different style of music now, and the dancers circled the floor as pairs instead of grouping into sets. One of Alaric's hands rested on her waist, while the other clasped her right hand. She followed his steps, at first tentatively, then floating in a smooth glide. Her heartbeat quickened, and the heat from his hand burned through the dress all the way to the quivering place at the apex of her thighs. She realized that under the layers of skirts and petticoats she wore no undergarments except gartered stockings.

Too soon the waltz ended, and Alaric guided her to the sideboard. He picked up a goblet and drank, and she did the same. A warm, salty, acrid fluid filled her

mouth. Startled, she swallowed and almost gagged. Looking into the cup for the first time, she saw a thick, red liquid.

He took it from her and set it down. "Forgive me, I should have warned you not to try that one. Come over here." He led her to another punchbowl and ordered a servant to ladle a drink for her.

This time she glanced inside the goblet before sipping. This beverage was crimson, too, but thin enough to see through, and it smelled familiar. She sampled it. Ordinary red wine. By the time she finished her drink, she realized what looked odd about the serving utensils. "All the bowls and cups are gold," she said. "Real gold?"

"Yes, those who live for centuries have no trouble accumulating wealth. And we can't use silver. Its touch distresses us." He drained another goblet of hot blood and beckoned her to the dance floor again.

Hours passed in a blur. Rapunzel danced a few sets with other men and paused occasionally to converse with them and with willow-thin ladies whose laughter sounded like silver bells. She couldn't remember most of the conversations minutes after they ended.

During another waltz she found herself in the arms of the fox-masked man. He bared his fangs at her, and his eyes glowed with fierce appetite. Somehow she discovered he had steered her away from the crowd and into an alcove that led to a balcony. When he stopped dancing, the music and the guests' voices suddenly seemed distant.

She stood up straight, determined not to show fear. "What do you want, sir? I didn't mention being tired of the waltz."

"I only wanted to get a better look at Alaric's new lady." His fingers explored the nape of her neck, exposed by the elaborate knot into which her hair was coiled.

Her stomach fluttered, and a chill ran down her spine. "Very well, you've seen. Now we'd better return to the floor. I would like to rejoin Alaric now."

"What's the hurry? He's probably dancing with some other woman." The man stepped closer to her, until their bodies almost touched, and took off his fox mask. Crimson dots glowed in the centers of his dark eyes. His hawk-like profile made him look sinister as well as dashing. "Since Alaric brought you here to meet us all, I'm sure he won't mind sharing." He bent over her and licked the side of her neck.

Her chest constricted. She placed her hands on the man's shoulders and shoved, but he didn't yield. "I mind, sir! And so does he."

The man laughed and nuzzled her bare shoulder. She kicked his shin, but her soft dancing slippers had no effect. He only laughed again. Reaching under his collar, she dug her nails into his flesh. With a snarl of pain, he shook her. "Mortal bitch!"

The next instant, he was pulled off her and hurled to the ground. Alaric stood over him, growling like a wolf.

The other man got to his feet, brushed off his clothes, and retrieved his fox mask. "Enough," he snarled. "Keep her, for all I care." He stormed in the direction of the ballroom.

Rapunzel leaned against the wall, breathing hard. Alaric put his arms around her and drew her onto the balcony. "Are you all right? Did that beast wound you?"

"No." She hugged him in relief and gulped air until her pulse quieted. "He didn't even start." A cool breeze ruffled her hair, stars shone in the dark sky, and moonflower vines laden with fragrant, white blossoms draped a trellis on the balcony. "It's beautiful out here."

"Then that unpleasant encounter didn't spoil the night for you?"

"Not at all." She turned in his embrace and twined her arms around his neck. "Thank you for bringing me. I wish we never had to part." Their lips met. The taste of his mouth and the flicker of his tongue made her melt inside. She clung tighter to him, and he held her so close she had to gasp for breath. Suddenly her slit tingled and ached with hunger to sheath him. "I want to—" she murmured.

"So do I." His mouth seared her neck. He bundled up her skirts to press against her bare skin.

Through his clothes his hardness teased her. She stood on tiptoe to rub on him. "Don't you need to drink first?" she whispered.

"No, I had plenty of refreshment in there. My rod's so stiff I can't wait." His hands shook while he unbuttoned his trousers. Lifting her by the waist, he rammed into her.

Rapunzel stifled a cry and wrapped her legs around his hips. Under her clothes he thrust with frenzied haste. Her sheath rippled around him, and the explosion shuddered through her whole body.

She collapsed against him, her face damp with tears of passion.

"It's all right, my love. My beautiful one." He stroked her until her tremors ceased. When she felt normal again, they returned to the ballroom for another cup of wine and a few more dances.

Gradually Rapunzel began to notice that the chatter among the guests was becoming more subdued, sinking to faint whispers. Glancing at the tall windows opposite the mirrored wall, she realized the night sky had started to lighten toward gray. "It's almost dawn," she said to Alaric.

"Yes, we'll have to leave. I'll visit you again soon."

"What do you mean, soon?" she said, grabbing his arm. "I expect you to visit me every night."

"Not that I don't want to," he said. "But you need to rest from my demands sometimes."

"I don't want rest. I want you, always."

He drew her to the side of the room and gave her a lingering kiss. "Then I certainly wouldn't dare disappoint you."

"Every night?" she prompted.

"We'll decide that as we go along. What about your guardian, though?"

"Oh, yes, I forgot to warn you," she said. "Mother Selene visits every fortnight, at the full and new moons. You mustn't let her catch you."

"If she never varies that routine, avoiding her shouldn't be hard. I'll stay away on those nights."

"You don't have to do that. She always comes at moonrise and performs her ceremony right away. It doesn't take long. Just watch from the forest until you're sure she's left. Then you can fly up as usual."

"Very well, my princess. I only hope the change in you isn't obvious to her at first glance." With a melancholy smile, he kissed her forehead. "You have a talent for undermining my noble resolutions." He looked around. "Never mind that now. We have to go."

Rapunzel saw the walls of the ballroom turning transparent. The sky outside paled to gray. The servants collecting the empty goblets shed their flesh and became skeletons clad in tatters. The guests melted into amorphous clots of darkness, their clothes transmuting into fur or feathers. The next moment, each man or woman became a hawk, raven, fox, owl, wolf, leopard, or some other beast or bird of prey. They streamed out the open door and vanished.

The candles blew out. A whirlwind swept in through the portal and snatched up Rapunzel. A dark mist blotted out her vision.

When it cleared, she lay huddled on the floor of her bedchamber, and the sun was rising.

Chapter 5

Rapunzel's stomach knotted with worry as she waited for Mother Selene's visit on the night of the new moon. Would the sorceress notice the change in Rapunzel, as Alaric feared? On top of her nervousness about facing her guardian, she also felt impatient. For the first time, she didn't look forward to the visit as a break in her routine. Instead, Mother Selene's ritual seemed like a tedious chore she had to go through before she could welcome her lover again.

At the usual hour, Mother Selene drove her carriage to the foot of the tower, stood below the window, and called for Rapunzel to let down her hair. When she did so, the witch pronounced the arcane word, and the golden tresses grew into a network for her to climb. Rapunzel suppressed a sigh of relief. Suppose the loss of her maidenhead had somehow blocked the operation of the magic?

The witch stepped into the bedchamber and spoke the counterspell with a wave of her hand. The hair returned to normal. "Good evening, my child." Her eyes narrowed. She scanned Rapunzel up and down as if looking for changes.

Assuring herself that Mother Selene couldn't notice any difference in her, Rapunzel forced herself not to evade the witch's eyes or do anything else to reveal her nervousness. She stood motionless in her ceremonial white robe with her hands folded in front of her.

"You look tired," the witch said. "Has anything disturbed your sleep lately?"

Rapunzel's cheeks flushed. Her thoughts flashed to the latest "disturbance" in her rest, no longer ago than the previous night. How could her guardian not guess what the blush meant or hear the hammering of her pulse? "Dreams, Mother Selene," she mumbled, looking down at her feet.

"What did you say?" came the sharp demand.

"Only dreams. I've been restless with dreams the past few nights."

The witch's long fingers grasped her chin to tilt her head up. "What kind of dreams?"

"I don't remember much. Like flying." That answer was close enough to the truth that Rapunzel hoped the deception didn't show on her face.

"You look rather peaked. Thin. Are you ill?" She placed her palm on Rapunzel's cheek, then her forehead. "You don't have a fever. If anything, you feel chilled. Have you been eating properly?"

Rapunzel's skin prickled at the unwelcome touch. "I haven't been very hungry, but I'm not sick."

"You are not quite well, either. Next time I'll bring a cordial for you to drink when you retire each evening. It will restore your appetite and help you sleep peacefully."

"Thank you, Mother."

To her relief, the witch let go of her and stopped staring into her face. "I can't let you fall into poor health." Rapunzel sensed no fondness or concern in the remark, and the next sentence confirmed the impression. "If you contract some disease, it might interfere with the ritual."

She led the way up to the magic circle on the roof. As always, they took their places at opposite sides of the pentagram. The witch recited her incantations and drew the few drops of blood necessary to invoke the enchantment. The night breeze burgeoned into a supernatural wind that swirled around the two women. Rapunzel felt her hair billow like a sail in a storm and sparks dance over her body. The familiar invisible grasp tugged at her heart. Azure light erupted from the center of the pentagram and enveloped her. Across the circle, veiled in the same glow, the witch intoned the rest of the spell.

Blue lightning flashed between the two of them. The circle on the floor seethed like water in a boiling cauldron. Mother Selene whispered to it in the

strange language of sorcery, but she seemed to receive no answer this time. Her voice rose in anger, and she stretched her arms toward Rapunzel.

Energy drained from Rapunzel like liquid from a cracked decanter. But she didn't see the stream of radiance that usually flowed from her to the witch. The witch's voice rose to a scream of fury that lasted for several minutes. Finally, she fell silent.

The magic stopped pressing on Rapunzel like a giant fist trying to squeeze her dry. She almost collapsed with the sudden exhaustion that turned her legs to limp rags.

With a contemptuous flip of her hand, the witch made the circle revert to darkness. "What is wrong with you?" She strode across the now-inert etching and caught Rapunzel by both arms, holding her upright. "It's clear you're useless to me for the moment. Go to your bedchamber."

Rapunzel obeyed, the older woman following her. At an impatient gesture from her guardian, she lay on the bed. Surely Mother Selene would realize the truth now, and—what? Fly into a rage and rip her to shreds?

The witch only stood over her, frowning. "You need to rest and regain your strength. Be sure to eat nourishing meals several times a day. At the full moon I shall bring the strongest healing potion I can prepare."

Rapunzel nodded, lightheaded with relief that her guardian's anger had ebbed. She had also feared that the witch would make an unscheduled visit to bring the promised cordial. Perhaps it took a long time to distill to its full strength.

"Mother Selene?" she said in a thready whisper. If she behaved even more exhausted than she felt, maybe the witch would tolerate the question she wanted to ask.

"What is it? Have you thought of some food or drink that might restore your health?"

"No, I don't need anything. I was only wondering—" She propped herself on one elbow. "I've been thinking about my future. Wondering if I'm meant to stay in this tower for the rest of my life."

The witch folded her arms and glowered. "What in the name of all the Powers put that into your head?"

"Nothing. Alone here, I have a lot of time to think."

"Why would you want to leave this refuge? You're safe here. You have everything you need. Is there anything you claim to lack?" Her voice lashed like a whip.

"No, except—well, I'm alone."

"Count your blessings, girl. Most human beings are corrupt and selfish, and many are downright dangerous. I've given you a life most young women would envy."

Rapunzel had her doubts about that claim, but she knew further argument would only provoke her guardian. "Yes, Mother."

"Could your parents who sold you have given you all these luxuries?"

"No, Mother." She closed her eyes, fighting tears.

"Then let's hear no more of this childish discontent. Concentrate on recovering so we can work together properly."

Rapunzel knew there was no "together," though. By now she realized her guardian saw her as a tool, not an acolyte or partner. She maintained a mask of submission until the witch sent up the basket of supplies and departed. With her mind in turmoil, Rapunzel lay down to wait for Alaric.

When he flew into the room and assumed his human shape, he noticed her anxiety at once. Kneeling beside the bed, he took her hand. "What's troubling you, dearest?"

"Mother Selene saw the changes in me. Sooner or later she's bound to figure out what we've done." She sat up and wiped her eyes.

He sat next to her and put his arm around her. "With her magic, that's probably true. Your blood must have altered by now."

She snuggled close to him, laying her head on his shoulder. "What can I possibly do about her suspicions?"

"I could stop feeding on you for a while, to make your blood run pure again. Or I could leave you alone altogether."

"No, I couldn't bear that!" Pressing her fingers to his temples, Rapunzel turned his head and raised her mouth to his. The nibble of his lips and the flicker of his tongue made her tremble with longing. Desire coiled in her loins, and she thought she could sense the hunger gnawing at the pit of his stomach.

He pulled away, leaving her panting for air. He heaved a shuddering sigh before he spoke. "That might not solve the problem in any case. If the arcane value of your blood depends on your virginity, it's too late already." He rubbed her back until her breathing settled to normal. "We have to discuss this rationally. I don't want to give you up. I would wither like a dry tree. But I can't let my needs condemn you to the witch's wrath."

"Don't forget I need you, too. There must be some way we can stay together."

"The obvious solution is for you to leave this tower," he said. "If you want to."

"I certainly don't want to spend my life here, which seems to be Mother Selene's plan. Especially after those dream travels with you. I want to learn about the outside world firsthand. I have books to teach me, but they're not enough anymore."

"Yes, I remember you mentioned those books," he said. "Why don't you show them to me?"

Though she suspected the request was mainly intended as a distraction from her unhappiness, she agreed. Hand in hand, they walked downstairs to the sitting room on the second level. From the bookcase she chose a guide to courtly etiquette. They sat on the divan under the latticed window and turned the pages together. "I never expect to need these lessons," said Rapunzel. "But I used to enjoy reading them and imagining myself at a state dinner or a noblewoman's soiree." She showed Alaric a passage about how to set a banquet table and which fork or spoon to use for each course. On the pages, miniature people in powdered wigs and velvet gowns or satin waistcoats sampled food from silver plates and bowls.

"Very entertaining magic," he said, caressing the back of her neck. "I hope someday you'll be able to attend a banquet like this."

"That might be interesting," she said, "except I don't think I'd care for one of those silly wigs."

Laughing, he flipped the pages to a scene of a formal dance. The printed figures circled in stately patterns on the shiny ballroom floor.

"Like the masquerade I dreamed about that other night. I remembered this lesson, and it helped me keep up with the steps." She frowned. "Was that real or not? I felt as if I was really there."

He clasped her hand. "It was a vision we shared in sleep, but on some plane of existence it actually happened."

Rapunzel shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Nor do I. As I told you, I gained this power with my transformation. I don't comprehend its working." His thumb circled the palm of her hand.

Shivering, she closed the book. "I don't want to talk about things I may never be able to enjoy. Let's not waste the time we could be enjoying another way." She guided his hand to her breast.

He gently removed it, barely skimming her nipple through the cloth. "Dearest, I shouldn't feast on you every night. Your health will suffer."

"Why should I care about that?" The bitter tinge in her voice surprised even her. "If I'm doomed to spend the rest of my life here, it might as well be a short one."

"That won't happen if I can help it." Cupping the back of her head, he lightly kissed her.

When he started to withdraw, she twined her arms around his neck and fastened her mouth to his. She extended her tongue to probe his lips until they parted. With an inarticulate murmur, he yielded, and his tongue teased hers.

The now-familiar warmth suffused her body. He placed a hand on her knee and stroked her through the silk of her nightgown. The fabric sliding over her skin made her squirm with impatience for a more intimate touch. Slowly he worked his way up her thigh. Breaking off the kiss, she rose onto her knees, arched her back, and rubbed her cheek and the side of her neck against his lips.

He shook his head. "No, I mustn't risk draining more than you can spare. I can satisfy you without feeding on you." His tongue flicked along her jawline back to her mouth. Meanwhile, his hand reached her mound and caressed her through the cloth.

How could his touch burn when his flesh felt so cool the rest of the time? Heat ignited in her breasts and between her legs. Her sheath ached to be filled. She felt dizzy with longing.

His fingers slipped between the folds of her slit, rubbing through the silk, which soon became soaked with her wetness. "Your sweet dew," he whispered against her mouth. "I want to taste it."

That image made her head spin and her pulse race. His fingertips found her bud and circled the tip until it throbbed in release.

Almost fainting, she threw her head back and reclined on the divan. Alaric knelt on the carpet and flipped up the skirt of her gown. "Your scent—delicious—" He nibbled his way up the inside of one thigh, never piercing the skin. She arched her hips, silently begging for him to reach the place that ached and twitched with need.

His tongue dipped into her slit. Her inner muscles clenched at the bolt of sensation that shot through her. The next moment, his fingers replaced his tongue, and he licked her bud. It swelled to unbearable tightness. Clutching the divan and digging her nails into the cushions, she thrust toward him. One of his arms wrapped around her waist to keep his mouth in position while she bucked in uncontrollable frenzy. His tongue flicked until her whole body convulsed with the pulsing of her most tender parts, and her sheath contracted around his fingers.

"Now," she gasped, "drink. You need it."

"I don't," he said, his cheek resting on her stomach. "I feasted on your honey."

"You still need more. My blood. You can't lie to me." She reached down and used a fingernail to scrape a bleeding line on her inner thigh. Her breath hitched at the momentary pain.

"Rapunzel, you shouldn't have." He nuzzled the scratch.

"If you had used your teeth, it wouldn't have hurt."

With a growl of surrender, he licked the wound in long, slow laps. She gasped at the touch of his hot, wet tongue so near her sensitized flesh. Answering that silent appeal, he caressed her with his fingers while he sampled her blood. She needed only a few strokes to make her soar to another peak.

At last he stood up and rearranged her gown. "Now I'd better leave before you tempt me again. Enchantress."

She responded to his teasing grin with a weak smile. She felt drained, just as he'd cautioned, but in a thoroughly pleasurable way. Instead of trying to entice

him into another embrace, she accepted his farewell, escorted him upstairs, and watched him fly into the distance. Lying down, she fell asleep instantly but had no dream adventures.

Chapter 6

He visited her every evening for the next fortnight. She developed the habit of sleeping most of each day, to be wide awake for his embraces. Though her vitality began to ebb, she hardly noticed, because the moment he touched her, she caught fire.

On the eve of the full moon, as they said their farewell, he seemed more somber than usual. At the window he enfolded her in his arms. "Come away with me tomorrow night."

"How? The tower has no door, and you say you don't have that kind of magic."

He laughed softly. "We'll manage. I'll bring a rope ladder. The challenge will be to escape without the witch stopping us."

Rapunzel clung to him and rubbed her cheek against his chest. "Why can't I just explain to Mother Selene what we've done and ask her to release me? If my blood doesn't work in her rituals anymore, why would she try to keep me from finding happiness somewhere else?"

"My dear, do you still believe she cares for you? She'll be enraged when she discovers you've lost your maidenhead."

"What could be so important about my blood, anyway?"

"I believe it serves as payment to the forces that maintain her in the prime of life. You say she hasn't changed in all the years you've known her. Who knows how old she actually is?"

Rapunzel shivered at the memory of Mother Selene's icy eyes. The few times the witch's wrath had broken upon her like a thunderstorm, its fury had terrified

her. She had no desire to face that storm again. "All right, I'll go with you. Can't we leave tomorrow before sunset, so I won't have to deal with her at all?"

"Unfortunately, I can't fly up to you until after dark. Sunlight weakens me and keeps me from changing form. We'll have to wait for her to make her visit and depart, just to be safe, and then hope she'll have no way to sense your escape. That way, we should have two weeks before she realizes you've disappeared."

"Won't we have a long journey to get out of her reach? The forest stretches from the tower all the way to the mountains."

Again his chest vibrated with laughter. "That's a magical illusion. In fact, there are towns within an hour's ride. I have a home in one of them, a house with a garden of night-blooming flowers. With doors and gates that open freely." His cool lips brushed her forehead. "I'll come for you after the witch's visit. Until tomorrow night, my love."

* * * * *

On the night of the full moon, Rapunzel waited for the witch with a dry throat and racing heart. The usual call came: "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair."

When Mother Selene climbed into the chamber, her narrow-eyed stare made it clear that she'd instantly noticed a change. "Child, you look pale. You are ill after all, aren't you?"

Hastily, Rapunzel stammered, "Not ill, Mother. But I do have something to tell you. To ask you." Nervously she rubbed her throat.

The witch gripped her chin and tilted her head up in the lamplight. "What's that on your neck?" She ran her fingers over the scratch and bent closer to peer at it.

"Dark Powers! It can't be!" Her pale face flushed with anger. "Who has violated you?" Before Rapunzel could gather her wits to pull away, the witch whipped out her silver dagger and pierced Rapunzel's wrist. She caught a droplet of blood on her fingertip and tasted it. "It is! Your blood is tainted! No wonder the spell went bad last time."

"Please, Mother Selene, listen to me!"

"Shut your mouth, you ungrateful slut!" She slammed her fist hard into the side of Rapunzel's head.

Rapunzel heard a crack, felt a lightning bolt of pain, and fell. Her head struck the corner of the bedside table. Just as she hit the floor, darkness swallowed her.

* * * * *

She woke in her own bed. Her head pounded, and her neck felt sore. The oil lamp no longer burned, but somehow she could see better than the moonlight should have allowed. Mother Selene crouched at one side of the window, below the level of the sill. She held the silver athame in her right hand.

Rapunzel's body felt encased in ice. She welcomed her frozen condition, for she didn't want the witch to notice she was conscious. She couldn't tell how many minutes passed before she heard Alaric's voice at the foot of the tower, "Rapunzel, where are you? May I come in?"

No, Alaric, go away, danger! If only she could whisper the warning directly into his mind. She dared not cry out. Why did he approach the tower with Mother Selene's horse and carriage in plain sight? Maybe the witch had rendered them invisible. When Rapunzel didn't answer, surely Alaric would realize something was wrong.

Then she heard a soft reply. "Yes, my love, come up." The witch's imitation sounded exactly like Rapunzel's voice, as far as the girl could tell.

Tears trickled from her half-closed eyes. Why couldn't Alaric sense the trap? In despair, she cast aside all thought of her own safety. Let the witch kill her. What would her life matter if her lover died? She struggled to force a scream from her throat. Paralysis held her silent.

The flapping of wings reached her ears, and the bird's silhouette appeared at the window. He swooped inside and changed to his human form. He looked around, puzzled. "Rapunzel?"

The witch leapt to her feet, brandishing the dagger. "You ruined her for me. Your little pet is dead, and so are you." With a roar of magically-charged fury, she plunged the silver blade into Alaric's chest. He howled in pain. The witch thrust the knife to the hilt into his heart, planted both hands on his shoulders, and shoved him out the window.

Her lover's death scream shattered Rapunzel's immobility. She sprang from the bed and knocked the witch to the floor. A wave of power swept over Rapunzel. She pinned the woman's arms and heard herself snarling like a wolf.

When Mother Selene tried and failed to shake off the girl's grip, the anger in her eyes changed to fear. "You're dead!" she shrieked. "I killed you!"

Rapunzel's lips involuntarily curled back from her teeth. A burning in her throat and stomach blotted out thought. Her hands shifted from the witch's arms to the skull and, in one swift twist, snapped the spine. She plunged her teeth into the woman's neck.

Blood gushed into her mouth, as intoxicating as hot, spiced wine. She gulped it down until the thirst abated and the witch's body started to grow cool.

Rapunzel stood up with a shudder of revulsion and staggered to the washbasin on the table, where she cleaned the woman's blood from her hands and face. The room looked different. A faint, fading glow surrounded the body on the floor. Her eyes saw all other objects in soft pastels instead of the blacks and grays of night. To her astonishment, the tapestries and bed linens turned to

ragged before her eyes. Paint on walls and window frames grayed and peeled. An odor of mildew tainted the air. When she glanced at the corpse, she found the hair grizzled, the hands withered into claws, and the woman's face a spiderweb of wrinkles over the contours of the skull.

Hurrying to the window, she stared down at the clearing and saw Alaric lying on his back in the grass. Near the edge of the forest, the horse grazed placidly in its harness. If Mother Selene had cast a spell of invisibility, her death had broken that spell. In the distance, lights of scattered villages glowed, lights Rapunzel had never seen before.

Am I trapped here now? she wondered. Tears scalded her cheeks as she gazed at Alaric's body, the dagger hilt protruding from his chest. She stretched her arms out, yearning for him. A surge of power crackled through her. She felt her legs draw up, her arms shrink, feathers sprout from her skin. She launched herself into the air. In the form of a huge owl, she soared out the window and spiraled to the ground.

Hardly aware of how she achieved the change, she willed herself back into woman-shape and fell to her knees beside Alaric. With her new strength, she yanked the knife out of his heart and threw it aside.

Sobbing, she tore open his shirt and kissed the stab wound. The elixir of his blood seared her lips. "Wake up, please, you can't die!" She slashed her wrist with her teeth and squeezed blood into the gash in his chest.

The edges of the wound grew together before her eyes. He emitted a low moan. Rapunzel flung her arms around him, nestled into his shoulder, and heard the laborious thud of his heart. Glancing up, she saw his eyelids flutter.

"Rapunzel?" he whispered. "My love?"

"You're alive!" She could hardly breathe for astonishment. Her heart pounded against her ribs.

"Almost. I need..."

She wiggled on top of him until his mouth nuzzled the curve of her neck. His fangs pierced her skin and shot the now familiar lightning bolt through her. The tightness of her nipples and the gush of heat between her legs made her squirm with eagerness. She felt his blood-engorged erection stiffen and press against the V of her secret place.

She sat up, straddling his hips, hoisted the skirt of her gown, and unfastened his trousers. The moment she ripped them open, his rod sprang free. She impaled herself on it. Her growls of pleasure mingled with his as he plunged into her wet grotto. With an urgent groan, he wrapped his arms around her to pull her down to his hungry lips.

Her transformed blood spurted into his mouth at the same moment his seed fountained into her. She clung to him, trembling in ecstasy at the completion of their love circle.

Long minutes passed before their passion exhausted itself. She burrowed into his arms with a sigh of satisfaction.

"You've joined me, just as we agreed, though I didn't mean to rob you of your choice this way. I never imagined the witch would slay you and force the change." He sat up and helped her to her feet. "Do you regret becoming a creature of the night?"

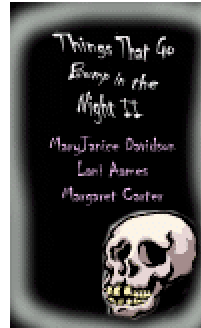
Stretching her arms wide to invite the cool breeze, she inhaled the tangy scents of the forest and its animal life. "Of course not. It means freedom."

A crackling noise reached her ears. The tower shuddered, stones crumbling away from it. "The witch's enchantments are dissolving," he said. "We must leave, now!" With an arm around her waist, he turned her toward the edge of the clearing where the horse and carriage waited. Behind the carriage, a broad path she had never seen before led into the trees. "Will you come with me to my home," asked Alaric, "and be my princess?"

"With the greatest joy, my lord of the night." She entwined arms with him and walked toward her new life.

-end-

Also by Margaret L. Carter



Night Flight

Things That Go Bump In The Night 2

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