

Blood Bonds

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BLOOD BONDS

**An anthology of vampire tales
By Fae Harlow, Lydia Parks
and Brenna Lyons**

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Lonely Heart

By

Fae Harlow

I have been working on my Shadows and related tales seriously since about November 2002, though I have been playing with the idea and jotting notes on them for as long as I can remember. The ideas come to me in dreams and musings about mythology. I have a great respect for the goddess and try to bring that out in my characters. There are no fluffy-bunny witches in my world. Well, at least not ones that are worthy of being heroines. At the moment, I am planning a total of eight books in the related vampire and Shadow world series. My world is sort of an Alternate Earth where the same laws of nature apply but a few interesting species exist and walk among the humans.

I was amazed when Brenna approached me for this anthology. Working on it has been a lot of fun. Bouncing story ideas off of each other, editing for each other before we submitted and just the constant conversation about writing has been incredible.

Fae Harlow

Dedicated to

Brenna, Blue, and Sage, who would not let me quit.

Chapter One

The Shadows

Sons of Hectate, Goddess of the crossroads.
Each are given a choice — life or death,
and with each choosing another chance.
Bound by a spell forgotten in the mists of time,
caught in the web as the centuries fly.
Walking alone or with their brethren, apart
even when together.
Hunted or feared by those alone who might
end their torment.
Brought to the light by souls surrounded in
shadow,
faces they dream of but never see.

Daughters of Hectate, witches,
daughters of the moon and sisters to the stars.
Having more than enough power to share
and sharing it freely with the Shadow who
seeks them.
Destinies intertwined and by magic set free.
In each, the other finding that which is lost,
the two souls which are one.

A sigh escaped Kora's slightly parted lips. Long, wavy locks of chestnut hair fell into her eyes. Unaware of the world around her, she moved her hands in the familiar patterns, invoking the gods and goddesses to aid in her quest.

Small shivers passed through her entranced form, moving from head to toe. A brilliant flash of light, like lightening across the sky, surrounded her tall, curvy form. Fingers moved, forming the horns as her voice rose, speaking words Kora Hart would not recall later in the familiar surroundings of her living room. *Beware the gift of bardic magick.* The words rang somewhere in the back of her mind, unheeded as Kora continued casting.

Later she would wonder at the occurrences, the powers she called upon, the words she spoke. Then Kora would wonder and worry as she always did. Words had tremendous power, and she could not recall the ones that wove the spell that surrounded her.

Kora blinked, her arms falling in wait at her side. She glanced around the circle. The edges of it shimmered with the combined presence of earth, sea, wind and fire, curling around the three-foot space she had circled with salt and water. Sigils shone brilliantly against the blackness at each of the cardinal directions. Bright red fire burned to the south, light yellow to the east, dark deep blue to the west, and deep forest green to the north.

A soft, pleased smile curved her unadorned lips. The residual sensations of power coursing through her left Kora feeling wildly giddy. She closed her eyes. Parting her lips, Kora drew in a slow deep breath and pushed it out her nose. She continued that exercise for a few moments, slowly grounding the energy into the earth beneath her.

Her fingers flicked lightly against the air, a sigh

escaping her lips. The spell was finished, forgotten once cast. She glanced in each direction, and brilliantly glowing sigils stared back at her. Smiling, Kora closed her eyes once more. Still, the symbols burned in her mind's eye. Kora turned first north, then west, south and east, releasing the energies that had gathered and expressing her heartfelt thanks.

She easily picked up the pieces of her working — candles, incense, salt, and water. Kora picked up the small dish of cakes and the crystal wineglass. She moved quickly to the door, well aware that should one of her neighbors see her, she would never live it down. Kora slipped out into the deep shadows, crossing the pavement to the soft grass and rich earth beyond. With careful hands, she deposited a few of the small crescent cakes onto the ground, then poured a liberal amount of the wine onto the earth. She silently gave thanks to her gods.

* * *

Kora blinked, taking in the strange surroundings. *Dreaming?* She almost laughed. She was dreaming. That eased her worry.

She wasn't sure exactly what she was dreaming. The entire world seemed to be encased in gray twilight. A light breeze lifted the sash on the gossamer robe she wore, tangling it playfully around her form. The silken material felt wonderful against Kora's skin, cool and soft. It moved like water over her flesh, reminding her of exactly why she purchased such a fanciful garment.

A sound, a sigh so soft she wasn't certain she'd actually heard it made her turn.

Kora gasped. Her pulse jumped. "*Who? What? Who are you?*"

There was a half-naked man standing in her gray twilight, his eyes drinking in her barely covered form, their dark depths stormy amber. She shivered as fear moved down her spine — fear and desire.

He was beautiful, she decided, not the kind of man Kora normally found in her head. In fact, she was quiet certain this one was the kind of man her mother had never thought to warn her about. He looked positively rakish, like something out of a fantasy induced by reading too many historical novels.

He chuckled, a dark sound that made her flesh tingle and pleasure spiral through her. Kora closed her eyes, trying to draw in a calming breath. The air was tinged in musk and sandalwood. It wasn't her scent, but his. Kora shivered again, deeper this time. Her lids moved slowly up, her eyes filled with him, suddenly all that much closer — too close for her state of mind.

"*What are you doing here?*" she asked, her eyes busy drinking in his well-shaped form, all hard lines and defined muscle. He reminded her of a brilliantly sculpted piece of hard clay that would not give if you touched it. Suddenly, Kora wanted to do just that, test the suppleness of his skin, the feel of it beneath her fingertips, wondering faintly how her mind would interpret something she had never felt in reality. Kora knew no men like him.

He smiled. His lips shifted to reveal a row of fine,

white teeth. The look in his eyes somehow matched the almost predatory smile that lingered on his lips. He stepped closer, closing the distance between them. His hand lifted and he entangled his fingers in her wild hair. He lifted his hand and...

"I am here, because you called to me. You invited me in. The question is, what am I going to do with you now that you've made such an unwise decision?"

Kora stiffened, her eyes going wide, white light surrounding her slender form automatically. He took a single step back, the smile on his lips widening. His gaze lingered on the lace that encased her breast, sending delicious shivers through her form. He reached toward her and traced the curve of her cheek. The bright glow surrounded his fingers.

He caught her eyes once more, leaning down to settle his lips lightly against her, so light it could barely be called a kiss. His hand slid away from her cheek. His lips curved against hers, pressing, caressing, lingering, enticing her to deepen the contact. Kora shivered, pressing herself against him, her hands sliding along the bare skin of his chest, testing it, learning the curves and lines.

Her lips parted as his nipped and tasted first top, then bottom. Her tongue darted out to taste the curve of his lips. Kora moaned softly as his mouth opened against hers, his tongue brushing against hers. His lips caught and teased and taunted. After a long moment, he released her lips, allowing her to draw in a much-needed breath.

He trailed his lips down her jaw and along the sensitive column of her neck, each movement

drawing startled little sounds from deep in her throat.

Dark and needy, Kora strained into the caresses of lips and tongue. She moved her fingers over the flesh of his shoulders, hands meeting in the wild fall of hair at the back of his head. She curled her fingers through the silken strands, holding him tightly against her.

His hands slipped beneath the shoulders of the robe and pushed it easily from her shoulders. The sensation of silk sliding down the backs of her legs sent more tremors through her already trembling form.

She gasped as his lips moved lower, his nose nuzzling against her skin. His hand came up, slipping around her ribs. His fingers fumbled with the clasp of her bra for a moment before releasing it. He drew back only far enough to bare her to his hungry gaze, his eyes going smoky. He allowed the lacy garment to fall unheeded to the floor, his eyes hungrily drinking in bared skin.

A bold smile formed on her lips. *This is my dream*, she reminded her muddled mind. *Mine*, which meant he was hers. Kora closed the distance between them, her hands greedily exploring his shoulders and chest, her lips following the paths of careless fingers over his chest, lingering over spots that made his breath catch or his hand tighten in her hair. Kora closed her eyes, allowing herself to become lost in the sounds of his pleasure, her pleasure.

She lingered over a male nipple, studying it with her tongue. His breath grew ragged against her hair. She felt his fingers shift. He gently pulled her away from his skin to capture her lips with his own.

They kissed wildly for a long moment, her hands moving restlessly over his form, skimming the edge of the dark pants he wore. The row of silver buttons gave under her curious fingers. The startled gasp that fell from his lips brought her eyes back to his.

Kora jerked away from him suddenly, the sound of an alarm clock forcing its way into the haze of her mind. It took only a moment for gray twilight to fade into nothingness and him along with it. Kora shifted reluctantly to wakefulness, her body still tingling from her dream lover's touch. She sighed, laying back in her bed and staring at the ceiling in annoyance.

Chapter Two

Griffin Sandler watched the Sunday night crowd pile its way into Joe's. The tiny coffee shop and diner seemed to fill to overflowing on nights like these. The food in the café was excellent, well prepared and decently priced. Griffin nursed a cup of Joe's house blend, its deep, rich flavor rolling pleasantly over his tongue.

He came for many reasons, mainly to watch. He watched them take for granted lover and friend alike, never seeming to know how lucky they truly were. He also came to alleviate the crushing loneliness of a house that had once been full of life. The Blackthorn estate now hosted only a single occupant and a handful of staff that left with the sun. Three of his companions had been taken in the last month, leaving Griffin with nothing to keep him company but unclaimed possessions and empty rooms.

The master of Blackthorn house had been away for months. He communicated through letters and e-mail, which had grown sparse as the months stretched on. On nights like these, Griffin found himself wondering if Lucian had simply followed his father into the madness that had claimed him after his

wife's untimely death.

He sighed. Being pessimistic and maudlin would not give Griffin the answers he sought. He had no hard evidence that Terrill was dead. His friend's mere absence was not enough, but his failure to make contact lead Griffin to believe perhaps they were holding him captive.

Griffin owed his Lady thanks. He had been close to simply attacking those he believed responsible. The desire to rescue his friend, if there was a chance of it, and the need for revenge had eaten away his normally tactician control, leaving Griffin at the mercy of less than sane emotions. He was in no condition to take on an entire coven of witches, no matter their number.

The last thing he had expected was to be granted such a dream. Griffin had expected to sleep entrenched in power, blood, pain and death, not to find himself in the misty warmth of gray twilight. The last thing he had expected was her.

Griffin never dared to dream that he might find what all of his cursed kind sought, but there could be no doubt of what she was. He had asked his Lady for strength, and she had sent him the comfort his wounded heart had needed so desperately. The dream's content had been a shock. Griffin had expected many things, but not for his gift to take the form of a green-eyed, brown-haired woman whose face he could not recall.

He could still feel her hot flesh pressed tightly against him, feel her lips hungrily nipping kisses over his skin. The dream had crossed Griffin's mind a

hundred times that morning. Each woman he saw with hair of that shade drew his gaze, but it was never *that* shade, never deep enough, rich enough, vibrant enough. The eyes were always brown, or blue — ordinary, not the verdant shade that had held his in the haze of his mind. None of them made him feel as she did. None of them gave him the incredible sense of rightness that could exist nowhere but in dreams.

“What can I get for you, Kora?”

The sound of Joe’s voice drew Griffin’s attention. The sheer warmth with which the name was infused made him wonder whom it belonged to. The large man leaned over the counter, an almost fatherly smile curving his lips. Griffin allowed his eyes to trail over the slender form that stood poised before the counter.

Her hands were folded neatly before her. Griffin could make out what looked like sparkling purple nail polish. Her clothing was odd. A scarf of varying shades of purple had been fashioned into a neat hair covering. The blouse she wore looked to be a loose-fitting peasant blouse that tied at neck and wrists. Tiny embroidered flowers that were of much the same purple as the shirt decorated the material along the neckline. Her skirt brushed the floor in numerous folds, matching the scarf’s wild purple shades.

She must have ordered while he studied her, for a few moments later she was moving toward the corner where he sat, a large bag on her shoulder and hands full of coffee, cream and sugar. She settled herself at the table diagonal from his, allowing Griffin the perfect opportunity to watch without her knowledge.

She pulled a notebook and a purple pencil from the bag. She opened the notebook and began to write, taking sips of her coffee every so often. She wrote furiously for a long moment before her brow pursed adorably and her eyes came up to scan the shop. She shook her head, mouthing something he didn't catch before beginning to write once more.

Green eyes, a lovely lipid shade, studied him curiously from under heavy, dark lashes. After a moment, a soft comely blush covered her cheeks, and he wondered at the content of her thoughts. Griffin reached toward her mind cautiously, not wanting to alert her of his interest; but instead of the wild cascade of thoughts he received from most people, Griffin found himself touching a warm, soft blanket of blackest velvet.

Her eyes widened for a moment, a strange, almost violet glow beginning to form around her slender frame. Griffin knew even before the words had formed in his mind he was looking into the eyes of fate. She was his fate given voice and form, a fate that would mean his death. So, like the others, Griffin was not destined to live the rest of his unnaturally long life alone. He would simply meet the same fate his brothers had, lost in a spell cast so long ago that only time remembered the words.

Griffin could be wrong. Her gaze seemed genuinely surprised, and she made no move to alert anyone of his presence. Not all witches hunted shadows, but this town had been home to Circle Luna for so long, it was easy to forget that fact. Luna was home to hunters, men who hunted all of his kind for

the mistake of one.

She was a witch, alluring and desirable for that reason alone. It did not help that her eyes were verdant green. She was most likely the newest bait of Circle Luna, he reminded himself harshly. Griffin wondered fleetingly if they were attempting to draw him out or if they were merely testing the waters, seeing if the town was shadow-free.

What's wrong?

He jumped, shocked at the sudden sound of an unfamiliar mental voice. It was not in his head so much as something he could hear. Griffin realized that the black velvet darkness that had held her thoughts away was gone. The voice must belong to her. He wondered if she sounded like that in reality.

Wrong? What would give you that idea? He sent his answer, testing her response.

She held his gaze for moment, before she seemed to realize she had started a mental link with a stranger. She laughed aloud, and the sound echoed softly in her mind.

You seem sad. It radiates off of you. I was just wondering why?

Griffin wondered for a moment. What should he say to that? *I was thinking about the irony of having the one thing you crave beyond all reason be the one thing that can kill you.* He watched carefully for a response, wondering what she would do.

Confusion clouded her face and echoed in her mind, her thoughts spinning in fast, ever-widening circles. She had no idea what he was talking about.

The sound of bells on the front door chiming drew

his eyes from her. Griffin froze. She was bait after all. He would have to compliment her on her ability to hide the truth, if he managed to survive what he knew must be coming.

What's wrong? This time the mental voice was sharp and loud, confused, and more than a little scared.

He shifted his gaze back to her face before he answered. *As if you don't know, witch.* Griffin tried to stop the anger from forming. What had he expected her to be?

Griffin saw the color drain from her face at his words. She slowly turned to see who had entered the diner. Now she blanched further, her green eyes going wide. Her entire body stiffened.

The five men that had entered the shop were scanning it with what they believed to be stealth, carefully checking each corner. There were four brunettes and a blonde. It appeared the blonde was in control, as the others walked slightly behind him, flanking his sides.

The blonde settled his gaze on the woman in purple, and Griffin thought for certain it would only be a moment before they converged on him. The desire to fight that should have been bubbling up inside him was strangely absent. The thing that shocked Griffin most was the rising anger he sensed in the mind of the woman the hunters were staring at.

"Well, if it isn't the little witch wannabe." The voice was cutting, and the words were designed to hurt.

She held her ground, though she was mentally

seething. Griffin could feel her anger and hear the witty response that formed in her mind but never left her lips. *That's right. I'm just a blessed-be wannabe.*

"Don't worry," she said, her voice surprisingly firm. "I am not the one letting things out and not putting them back where they belong. I couldn't let them out even if I tried. I'm a mundane after all."

Whatever she was, mundane certainly wasn't the word. Couldn't they see the power that wrapped itself around her, coiling around her arms and legs and criss-crossing like second skin over her body? No, he realized, they couldn't.

Griffin wanted to stay and see how this turned out, to find out what they were doing out and about. Most of all, he wanted to find out if Terrill was indeed dead.

She stood, her eyes filled with fury, and Griffin couldn't help but wonder what his internal rambling had caused him to miss. She shoved her notebook and pencil back into the bag and slung it over her shoulder.

"What's wrong, little girl, don't like to hear the truth?" The blonde's voice was silky smooth and condescending.

She stiffened. Griffin was shocked by the venomous anger that had taken up residence in her.

"What, no homemade curse?" The hunter taunted.

A strange little smile formed on her lips. "Only one. May you reap all that you sow." She blinked once, and Griffin was shocked by the sudden glowing around her form, brighter than it had been before, blue instead of violet. She moved quickly, pushing

her way past the five men. Griffin glanced around the shop, surprised to see that no one appeared to have noticed the confrontation between the five men and the oddly dressed woman.

Chapter Three

Once outside, Kora drew in a slow breath, swearing fiercely. Those egotistical bastards really got on her nerves. As though they held the monopoly on the word witch! As though they had the right to pick and choose who wore the title.

“Blessed-be wannabe?”

The voice was smooth and velvet. It sent a chill down her spine and heat coiling in her stomach. Kora didn’t have to turn around. There was no doubt who stood behind her. “I don’t leave my mind an open book to strangers very often,” she forced past the lump in her throat. Kora turned slowly, her breath catching in her chest.

He was tall, taller than her by a good head, making him somewhere between five-ten and six-two, she guessed. His amber eyes looked darker with only the moon as illumination. He was dressed in black and dark shades of blue; a knit shirt that clung to a well-muscled chest and black jeans that hugged his buttocks indecently complemented the darkness of the aura that surrounded him.

The loneliness was still there, yawning like some bottomless cavern inside him. It tugged

uncomfortably at her. Kora felt her pulse jump as something dark shifted in his eyes. Liquid warmth spilled through her. She shivered, not at all sure how to react to the fear and desire that was fast mixing inside her.

“What does that mean? Blessed-be wannabe?”

Realising suddenly that he wasn't going to simply let it go, Kora tried to gather her thoughts into some semblance of order. “My mother taught me when she was alive. My aunt finished my training, introducing me to different traditions. She said that if I wished to find out what a coven was like, I should petition to join one. They made it very clear that I was not wanted or desired.” Kora almost laughed at the shocked look on his face.

“You have power. I could feel it in there. I saw it in there, wrapped around you like second skin. I've never seen such power.”

His words sent a strange chill down Kora's spine. Something in the way his voice deepened as it caressed lingeringly over the word power unsettled her. There was a strange hunger that seemed to stir inside him at its mention, setting warning bells off in the depths of her mind.

She took a step back from him, her shields shifting and tightening in response to her uncertainty. He took a step closer, and Kora cursed her stupidity. Tall, dark and handsome looked harmless enough in the shop, but now danger radiated off of him. A powerful, predatory grace swirled around him, making her feel very much like prey.

“Now I've frightened you. I don't mean to. It's the

moon. I can't help myself." He said it very softly, the remorse in his voice softening her fear as he walked closer to her.

Kora stopped, something in his statement rousing the researcher in her. The moon would be new in a few days. She knew it even without checking the sky. Kora was already starting to feel the restlessness that came heavy on the heels of the waning moon. That was the reason she'd gone out tonight. She hadn't been able to stay in. That, and she had wanted to escape the ever-present memory of the most highly erotic dream she'd ever had.

She felt her cheeks heat, forcing her mind back to the matter at hand. The desire to reassure him warred with the desire to simply go home and curl up with a good book. His loneliness won, and Kora closed the space between them, settling her hand on his forearm.

"I am not afraid of you. I am just on edge. It makes me cranky," she said softly. There was something in the air. Change, wild and sudden, was coming to her world. She knew it. Her cards had said as much only that morning. Looking into the amber depths of his eyes, Kora wondered if he was the embodiment of that change.

* * *

The apartment was empty. The answering machine's red light blinked wildly. Kora chuckled, realizing her Aunt Agnes must have called. Her mother's sister had taken care of her from the time she was sixteen, being her mother's only living relative. Agnes and Chase

had provided Kora with everything she could have wanted without trying to replace the parent she lost.

Agnes could easily be given credit for almost every object on Kora's makeshift altar. Her aunt had been a solitaire as far back as Kora could remember, working only with her sister. She had guided Kora down her chosen path when her mother had no longer been able to.

She moved toward the answering machine, knowing it was too late to call, but wondering what Agnes was going to say.

The high-pitched beep played, and her aunt's smooth voice filled the room. "I appear to have missed you, my little witch. I hope everything is going well. Call me when you get this, if it's not too late."

The warmth in that voice always brought a smile to Kora's lips. Glancing at the clock on the wall, she decided that it was simply too late and she would have to call Agnes tomorrow afternoon.

Kora fleetingly thought of calling her in spite of the hour and categorizing her feelings from the man in the bar. She dismissed the idea. Kora could hardly tell her aunt she had allowed an open link to exist between them. She would get the dressing-down of her life. The action had been foolish and if Kora was lucky, nothing nasty had hooked into her aura. Agnes wouldn't care that the loneliness Kora had sensed had eaten at her, begging her to fill it. Agnes would demand she come over right away for a proper cleansing.

She needed to take a shower to wash away the

anger and annoyance of her encounter with the Circle Luna-tics. They took the whole demon-hunting thing far too seriously for Kora's tastes. Kora realized after she had petitioned that her thoughts and feelings on the subject of demons would not be welcome.

She dropped her keys on the counter, settling her bag on the small table. Kora padded across the kitchen's cold tile floor, absently reaching her hand out to scratch the small head of the white cat that fixed her with curious blue eyes as she passed. She grabbed her robe and nightgown off the shelf where she had folded them that morning and headed into the bathroom. Kora grabbed the bottle of sea salt that sat on the counter, then leaned over the tub and turned on the tap.

Kora watched the tub slowly fill, glancing over the various bottles of homemade oils and bath salts that sat on the stand next to the wall. She selected the bottle she had labeled Cleansing. Kora shook the salt and then turned it over, pouring some of it into her hands. She measured out two palms full of the salt and dumped it into the rising water.

The scent of sage, sandalwood and citrus filled her head. The scent alone eased some of her anxiety. Kora could already feel her muscles relaxing at the prospect of the warm bath water lapping at her skin. She turned off the tap, running her fingers over the surface of the water, dampening her fingertips and testing the water's temperature.

She stripped her clothes off, piling them on the hamper. She was going to have to do laundry tomorrow before she left for work. Kora settled into

the tub. A small gasp escaped her as hot water rushed up to meet her cooler skin. She rested against the far edge of the large tub, immersing herself.

Kora allowed the hot water to ease her muscles, the scent clearing her mind. She visualized all the day's events dissolving into the water's hot embrace, feeling lighter almost immediately. Kora soaked for a few moments longer before ducking her head.

She came back up and wiped her eyes, then sat for a moment, breathing slowly. Kora reached forward and pulled the plug, watching the water begin to drain. She lay back, imagining all the darkness and trouble flowing down the drain with it, letting go of the lingering anger that still burned in the pit of her stomach. Kora stood and pulled the shower curtain shut. She washed her hair and rinsed before lathering soap on her skin and washing away the residue of the day.

* * *

Griffin was afraid to go to sleep, certain that tonight he would be forced to relive the dreams of darkness that last night's passionate encounter had replaced. He already knew that the dream would contain her. She was under his skin, and he wasn't even certain he knew her name.

Kora did not seem likely, and he had not thought to search her mind for it. Kora, the beautiful goddess married to the lord of the underworld, destined to spend six months of the year in his shadowy domain. The parallel to the tale was appealing. She could

easily become his Kora. Griffin rejected the thought. He could never trick her into eating the fruit of the dead.

He shook himself out of his once-more maudlin thoughts. There was a good chance Griffin would never see the woman again. He was still trying to wrap his mind around the idea that Luna had turned her down. They clearly didn't realize what she was — or it was a lie, a cleverly laid ruse to trap him. The thought didn't sit well with Griffin, the idea that she was false, that anything she had said to him was untrue.

Griffin knew he would not be able to fight his body's desire for rest much longer. Even in his unchanging state, he required a certain amount of sleep. He'd been pushing himself in the week since Terrill had gone missing, but Griffin knew he would be of no use to the other man if he got himself killed.

Maybe she could help me? The thought was ridiculous, of course. Even if she wasn't with Circle Luna, getting her to help him would mean telling her in no uncertain terms what he was. Griffin liked his memory of her acceptance as it was. He did not want to taint it with fear.

Gray twilight surrounded him, whispering over his skin, invading his mind. Her scent came with it, warm and alluring. He could see her pale skin and curving form. She was dressed much the same way as last night, that same shimmering robe that looked like it was made of cobwebs and breath. She was faced away from him, gazing out into the nothingness.

Griffin moved slowly, wondering what she would

do. Would she welcome him or would she turn away from him? He reached for her, elated when she leaned easily back into his body, her mouth falling open on a soft sigh. Griffin leaned down, brushing her long brown tresses to one side, and pressed his lips to the soft, vulnerable skin of her neck, drawing a ragged sound from her lips. She pressed back against him, her form shivering in pleasure bolts of hunger. Untamed desire washed through his system.

He slid his hand toward her, wanting desperately to touch, to taste more of her sage-scented skin. Griffin ran his tongue lightly over the warm expanse of flesh between shoulder and neck, feeling her shudder. He turned her slowly, keeping her body tightly against his. The brush of her breast and thigh against his body hardened him further.

He stared down at her face, shock freezing him for a moment. It was her. He watched as her eyes widened and recognition flared, sending another shock through his system.

"Oh, goddess," she whispered softly, a hot blush covering her face. She made a move to step back from him.

Griffin caught her tightly to him, his lips skimming along her cheek as he spoke. "No," he murmured throatily, catching her lips with his own. He held her tightly, running his large hands down her slender frame. He trailed his lips from hers, along the edge of her jaw, down the slope of her neck. Griffin lingered over the tender flesh beneath her ear, causing her breath to go ragged.

"What?" she started to question.

He captured her lips once more. His tongue moved hungrily against their seam, begging for entrance. Griffin needed to taste her, to tease her, to make her forget everything but how good it would feel to loose herself in him.

Griffin groaned low in his throat when her lips opened beneath his. The interior of her mouth was hot, wet, and tasted faintly of mint. He tangled his tongue with hers, drawing her into a dueling dance that left her panting softly against him.

She pressed herself to him, her mouth finding his nipple unerringly. She suckled lightly then nipped hard, causing him to gasp and arch against her. She rocked her hips in response, sending hot wild pleasure throbbing through him. She moved herself sensuously against his arousal, her nibble fingers skimming over Griffin's eager skin, measuring him through the loose cloth of the silken boxers he wore. Her fingers curved treacherously around his aching erection.

His hand caught hers, pulling it away from his straining flesh. He caught her lips again, stealing her breath with ease. Griffin drew her tightly against him, and she clung to him, feeling the world around them change again.

* * *

Kora gasped as the hard surface of a paneled door met her back. *Where? How did he do that?* She wanted to know what he'd created, but his mouth was on hers again, his tongue delving between her lips,

enticing hers into play. It was a siren's call she could not resist, and she gave herself over to him and it. Kora leaned her body readily into his, feeling his arousal hard against her stomach, feeling his fingers skim along the opening of her robe, slowly sliding down between the folds of silken fabric. She shivered, dragging her mouth from his.

Her eyes were caught and held by the almost golden hue of his amber gaze. Kora shivered as his finger slid lower, catching the loosely tied sash and pulling. She tried to control her ragged breathing, her eyes darting away from his to watch the sash fall to either side.

His hands were everywhere, sliding slowly over her bare skin, turning the pleasant heat of desire to a fiery blaze that begged for his touch. She arched into his hands, whimpering, begging for his touch in mindless pleas. He leaned forward, capturing the swollen peak of her left breast, his hand coming up to cup and caress the right.

His lips trailed to the hollow between her breasts as his right hand blazed a slow trail down her torso, tracing the indent of her waist and the flaring curve of her hip. Kora gasped as those fingers trailed lightly along the inside of her thigh. Her eyes shot to his.

A wolfish smile settled on his lips. The promise in his golden gaze stole her breath. She cried out in shock as his nimble fingers easily found and encroached on the dewy fold between her thighs, finding the tender, secret heart of her. Kora clutched at his hand, arching, desperate for deeper, harder contact.

He laughed huskily, nuzzling against her neck. Kora felt as if she were on fire, her skin burning everywhere it touched his. It wasn't enough. She wanted him endlessly closer. His eyes raked boldly over her form, drinking in her undeniable response.

"Please," she whimpered.

The hands on her body responded swiftly to her plea, as his lips captured hers anew. Kora moaned incoherently into his mouth, her hands sliding around his neck. She jerked the tie that held his hair away from his face free. Her fingers greedily tested the thick silken strands.

Kora arched into the harsh, almost frantic rhythm of the fingers that danced expertly over her moist center. The coil of white-hot desire that turned in the pit of her stomach grew tighter with each movement of fingers and lips over skin. His mouth moved from hers to nurse over her pulse point, the almost vampiric nature of the touch searing her. His fingers twisted a final time against her center, drawing a ragged cry from her. Kora sagged against the wall behind her, her head falling forward to rest heavily against his shoulder.

He pressed his mouth against her sweaty skin, lapping up the salty residue. She sighed softly, lifting her head and waiting till he looked into her eyes. His eyes were dark, and she could feel the hunger washing off of him in waves. He shifted, pressing his body against hers. The hard ridge of his arousal, urgent against her, brought a gasp to her lips and a flood of color to her cheeks.

"Who are you?" she whispered finally.

* * *

Griffin heard in the question all that she did not ask. Every question that existed in his mind was mirrored in her blushing face. He nuzzled against her again, his body still begging for release. He wanted her. Nothing could change that. Even knowing who she was didn't change that.

"Griffin," he said softly, nuzzling against her neck, nipping the flesh gently. He waited, wondering if he would have to ask to be given the same power that he had just handed to her.

"Kora," she said, arching into his touch. "This is crazy."

Griffin had to agree. It was crazy. He was letting her talk when all he really wanted to do was tumble her in luscious disarray onto the huge four-poster bed that he'd conjured. He wanted nothing more than to possess her completely. His unruly body clamored for just that, but he could hardly take what she did not willingly give.

"Indeed," he agreed, trailing his lips down her neck and over the swell of her breast, nipping gently at the turgid tip. "I want you," he said when he'd lifted his mouth from her flesh.

"Yes, I can tell," she whispered, her voice wonderfully breathless.

"Can I have you?" His tone was teasing, but it was the crux of the matter. Griffin could take nothing she did not want to give.

"Please."

He caught her lips hungrily. Griffin drew her with him toward the four-poster, watching as her eyes widened and then moved from him to the lushly covered bed.

Chapter Four

Work had been hell. In the weeks since the dreams began, Kora had steadily avoided places where she might have seen Griffin. She tried to concentrate on living in the real world, instead of hungering for the reality of her dreams.

Eight hours a day, Kora sat stuck behind an office desk, entering meaningless data into a computer. It was never enough to distract her from the promise those dreams held. It weighed heavily on her mind. She'd allowed a perfect stranger into her mind, eagerly gave herself over to his keeping, making love to him not once, but many times and craving the reality of it each morning when she woke.

The first time she could almost forgive herself. After all, Kora had believed him to be a figment of her imagination, one she had not even been able to recall clearly in the light of day. She should have stopped it the moment she realized who it was, or at least when she realized Griffin's mind was as fully entrenched in the dream as hers was.

The cool night air lashed across her burning cheeks. Kora wanted to talk to him, and yet she didn't think she could look at him without remembering the

urgent, wild feel of his body within her own, the feel of his hot breath against her shoulder, his lips trailing wild kisses along her neck. Kora sighed, frustrated. This was getting her nowhere.

To add to her already wild nights, it appeared she had gained a rather inept shadow. Members of Circle Luna were following her. She knew it was them and was half tempted to call them out. Kora wanted to know what had changed, what had made her worthy of their misguided attentions. Something told her that Griffin was the reason why. She hadn't actually seen him outside of dreams in three weeks, but his presence still surrounded her like second skin. She couldn't breathe without his scent filling her head. The ghost of a living, breathing man haunted her. If she were only brave enough, she could easily go to him.

She sighed, closing her eyes. Kora drew in a slow breath tinged with the scent of wild things — of sandalwood, of spice, of the musky scent that belonged solely to him. Her eyes popped open, shocked. She scanned her surroundings, his name on the tip of her tongue.

Kora was grabbed suddenly from behind, pulled tightly against a hard-muscled form she knew almost as well as her own. Griffin pulled her into the shelter of the trees off the winding path she had been walking. His breath was warm and urgent against her ear. She felt his lips brush teasingly against the shell, then nip the lobe. Kora whimpered. It was the first time he'd touched her thus outside of dreams, and already her body ached for his.

She forced the wild, unacceptable response down, jerking away from him. He allowed her freedom without a fight, his amber eyes meeting hers when she turned.

“What the hell is going on? How did you get inside my head?” she demanded, livid and embarrassed that she had shared so much with this man. They were lovers only in the world of their dreams, and yet her body warmed and rose to his as though it was real.

Kora could still feel his hands on her skin, his lips on hers, his body deep within her own – rocking, shifting, moving, rearranging the world as she knew it. Kora wanted to hate him for making her aware of such hungers, of awakening a part of her that demanded, that ached for him.

Griffin studied her, seeming to take her anger in stride, even as his amber-colored eyes drank in her every movement. “You invited me,” he said, as though it explained everything.

“I did no such thing.”

“Didn’t you? Can’t you feel the magic that binds us? Even those inept fools of Circle Luna can feel our connection. You’re mine.”

His voice had gone dark and velvet as he spoke, a rumbling purr that sent warm shivers through her body, and she hated him for it. No one was meant to have that kind of affect on her. No one should affect anyone the way he did. Just his eyes drinking in her form should not send wet heat pooling inside her.

“I don’t belong to anyone. Least of all, you,” she said. Her voice shook, belying the truth of her words. Kora turned away from him, glancing out into the

shadows. "If— If it is magic, all magic can be unraveled. You need merely to cut the cords."

The shocked look on Griffin's face, the pain that swiftly followed, made her regret her words.

"I do not think even you can unravel this magic." He said it ever so softly, glancing away from her.

She stood for a moment, caught between desire and indecision. Kora knew if she went to him, what had been only dreams would be reality. She wasn't at all sure she was ready for that, and yet Kora couldn't leave him alone with that emptiness. No one deserved to feel that kind of loneliness.

"What are you?" she asked, taking a step closer to him.

His eyes widened slightly, and Kora knew she had hit on something important.

"And why does Circle Luna follow me?"

"I am a shadow, and that is why they follow you. They want me and are using you to get me."

"Shadow?" She'd heard the term before, once in a conversation with her aunt. Agnes had called them psychic vampires, after a fashion. A shiver took her. "Have you fed off of me?" she asked, more curious than frightened, wondering how deep their connection was and how deep it would have to be in order to protect him.

Circle Luna might be bad witches, but they were good hunters. They prided themselves on their demon hunting abilities, and something told her that Shadows were considered the biggest and the worst demons.

Which brought up another good question— Why

didn't he feel demonic? Kora had been in the presence of her share of evil, and while wild and untamed certainly applied to the gorgeous man before her, evil did not.

Griffin looked uncomfortable. He shifted, fidgeting, loosing some of his inherent grace. Her question had unsettled him.

"I've taken your power in the dreams, but never here. I didn't want to bond us like that without you understanding what it meant," he said finally.

"But you wanted to?" she asked curiously.

"I believe, my lovely one, that want is a bit of an understatement. You have no idea what kind of hell it's been to accept only what you would give me in dreams, and demand no more of you. Were you anyone else, your will would have bent easily to mine, but you're too damn strong."

"You prefer a woman of weakness?" she asked curiously, wondering what on earth he was talking about.

"Hell no! I prefer a woman just like you, wild and fiery — and likes to be on top." He grinned at the hot blush that spread over her cheeks. Kora did like to be in control. In the dreams, she sometimes left Griffin panting for more, wanting so desperately to take control, and yet rewarding him most graciously for allowing her to lead.

* * *

Griffin wanted her. He'd followed Kora all night. He'd waited until he was sure she'd lost the Circle

fools before he made his presence known. Griffin was slowly going insane with a wanting that no dream would ease.

He reached for her, fully intending to kiss her properly. Kora pulled back, shaking her head, raising her hand to stay him. His heart clinched. Apparently he was wrong. What he was did bother her.

"No." Her voice came out a soft pant. "Talk now. Touch later."

Those words got his attention. His touch was welcome. Okay, it was welcome later, but still he was going to get to touch. Griffin groaned softly, hardening at the thought of actually being allowed to touch Kora in reality. He pulled her against him, nuzzling her neck, breathing in her warm, intoxicating scent.

"This is not conducive to talking," she gasped, moving into his touch in spite of her words. "That's not fair."

Kora groaned as his fingers closed expertly over the hard tip of her breast, tugging on the tender bud. He nipped gently at her ear, fully willing to ignore everything if it meant he could have her here and now.

"Would you listen to me, you silly shadow," she growled, even as she leaned into his touch. "This isn't safe, and we need to talk."

"Yes," he agreed, nuzzling her neck, nipping the flesh lightly. Griffin could already feel his control slipping. Kora wasn't safe. He'd thought he'd be able to control it, that the dreams would be enough to feed the darkness. "It's not safe for you to be with me

tonight," he whispered softly, running his tongue over the skin he'd just nipped in apology.

Griffin drew her close, shifting so he could capture Kora's lips properly. He devoured her, drinking in the little mewling cry that escaped her lips and dragging his tongue over the hot, wet interior of her mouth, tangling it with hers. Kora moaned softly, her hands reaching for him. She turned into him, into the kiss. Griffin was shocked and wildly aroused when she nipped harshly at his lips, as he drew back from her. Kora had no idea the danger she was courting, but she was already responding to his darkness, matching it with her own.

"Mine, and you don't even know it," he said before he abruptly released her.

He knew she spoke as he walked away. Griffin knew they needed to talk. He knew Terrill's life hung in the balance, that if Kora did not agree to his claim there was no way to save the other shadow, because without her, Griffin could not rescue him.

* * *

He was making her crazy, saying it wasn't safe. He wasn't safe, kissing her senseless and then walking away before Kora could form coherent thoughts. She thanked every small god she knew that her Aunt knew all sorts of inane and unusual types of information, and apparently Agnes found the whole concept of shadows interesting.

Griffin was dangerous. He was right, but if she really was his, he couldn't harm her. Kora shivered,

remembering the dark hunger in his eyes when he'd spoken of power, the same dark hunger she'd witnessed the first time she'd dreamt on the new of the moon. He'd taken her wildly that night, with little fanfare, not that she'd needed it. Heat had pooled between her thighs the moment he'd looked at her. Her body changed, becoming velvet and wet silk. Kora shivered, the memory stealing her breath.

She froze. Kora wasn't alone, but she knew even before she moved toward the switch that she would not make it. Griffin caught her easily in his arms. Her body betrayed her to him, softening against his hold, shifting and pressing against his familiar form.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped. Kora listened to his breathing, felt each exhalation brush against her ear and neck. Some part of her knew why he was here. The man might accept her denial of his claim, but the shadow would not.

Kora heard the words of warning she'd received from Circle Luna echo in her mind. *Be careful witch, least your pride makes you prey.* She hadn't understood really, but now she had an inkling of what they meant. The tiny hairs on her arm stood on end, and her body quivered with fear and desire. Goose bumps bloomed on her flesh. Her nipples grew taut, and hot wetness pooled between her thighs. Kora closed her eyes, leaning back against his form, feeling him draw in her scent. He leaned forward, his breath hot against her skin, his hands strangely cool in comparison.

"I could no more stay away from you then the tides can ignore the moon." Griffin's voice sounded rough to her ears — different, darker, wilder, the

energy around him edgy as a shattered crystal.

"It's not safe. Circle Luna is watching me," she said, her voice breathless and small. She turned her head slightly, leaning into his chest, nuzzling against him almost against her will. No matter how many times she told herself it was not real, the dreams had cemented a bond that even her fear could not diminish.

"Yes, they are," he agreed, his breath hot on her ear. "I thought you one of them when I saw you at Joe's. I even wondered it as you writhed beneath me in dreams."

His voice was husky and smooth, sending warm eddies of pleasure through her system. He was so close, his skin cool where it touched hers. His lips moved against her skin. She whimpered, pressing back against him wantonly.

He growled, softly nuzzling her neck. "I need your help," he whispered, his voice suddenly serious.

Kora shifted, drawing back and reaching for the lights, but he held her fast.

"Help?" she managed to push past her lips. "With what?"

"They have Terrill. The Circle does. He lives, but he can't last another moon cycle with them." Griffin sounded as though he was having trouble forming the words, as if his mind was lost somewhere else.

"How can I help you?" she asked, her own voice raspy.

"You will?"

Kora could hear the surprise in his voice, feel the tender kiss Griffin pressed to her neck. Everything

about this was strange and hazy, like one of their shared dreams, but she was certain — almost certain she wasn't dreaming. She'd never been this aware in the dreams. They always seemed unreal somehow. This was real. She could feel the steel of his chest pressing against her, his arousal hard and heavy in the small of her back. Her lips parted, her breath rushing past in response.

"Yes. Of course, I will help you if I can." Kora tried to concentrate on words, on his voice, on anything but the wild pulse of desire that beat inside her, the hunger his nearness stirred. It was crazy — a thousand kinds of wrong. She barely knew this man, and yet that wasn't true, for while the dreams were highly erotic, they often spent hours talking, touching, learning about each other until Kora ached for the reality of it.

Griffin turned her to face him suddenly and she stumbled, falling heavily against him. He groaned softly, his breath bathing her face as she looked up. Kora could see the hard angles and planes of his face in the shadows but nothing more.

His mouth feathered over hers, and she felt her entire body tighten in response. She pressed against him, seeking a deeper joining. Griffin chuckled, his touch weaving a wonderful dark sorcery around her. His mouth captured hers heatedly, his tongue lashing the depths of her mouth. Kora groaned, her hands tangling in his dark hair. It was down she realized. He left it down for her. Fisting the thick locks, Kora pulled his mouth more tightly to hers. She clung to him, arching against his body, wanting to be closer

and not caring how she accomplished the task.

Everywhere his cool hands, lips, and tongue touched left fire in their wake. *How can something cool make me burn this way?*

"Griffin." His name tumbled past her lips as he easily made short work of the shirt she wore.

"Yes," he growled against her skin, his lips surrounding the wildly beating pulse at her throat. Griffin suckled hungrily on the flesh, and she rocked her hips to the rhythm of his touch. Kora's hands held him tightly against her. He trailed his lips from her pounding pulse to the aching fullness of her breast.

His hands slid down her side to her hips. He pulled her with him. Kora vaguely noted that Griffin must be able to see perfectly in the dark. The thought intrigued her. Kora felt the wall's cool paneling at her back. The sensation drew a startled gasp from her. He chuckled against her neck, his hands moving idly over her stomach before shifting to catch the taunt peak of one breast, tugging on it insistently. She arched into the touch, gasping, wanting more, needing more.

"Please," she gasped, the fiery pleasure sweeping through her not nearly enough to ease the ache he'd created.

He slid his hands down to cup her buttocks, drawing her against his straining arousal. She rocked her hips frantically, grinding herself rhythmically against him.

His hands slid up her sides. Kora leaned forward, giving him the access he wanted. She shivered as her the silken material of her bra came loose and fell to

the side, a small gasp escaping her lips as Griffin drew hungrily on the hard crest of one breast, his hand fondling the other.

* * *

Kora slid her hand down his back, sending wild new shafts of desire that originated in his groin and coursed through him. Griffin arched his hips hard against her, wanting, needing nothing between them. He wanted her naked and in his arms, beneath him, writhing in reality as she had in dreams.

He shivered as those hands slid over the straining front of his trousers, making short work of the button that kept him from her. The fingers on one hand splayed across his chest, catching the edge of a nipple with her short nails, as her other hand tugged forcefully at the zipper.

The scent of her arousal surrounded him. His hands slid down her curves again. Griffin tugged at the ties on her skirt, delighted when the material gave, falling away from her body. His hand slid to caress the top edge of the silken panties she wore. Griffin appreciated the emerald green color in the darkness before kneeling to press his mouth low on her stomach. Kora gasped softly as he pulled them from her body, lifting her legs to help him accomplish the task.

He felt the shiver take her, felt her hands reach for him, pulling him tightly against her heated skin as he stood. His shirt fell from his shoulders as her hands explored his body boldly. Griffin sucked in a sharp

breath as her fingers surrounded his hard shaft, her other hand pushing the slacks down his hips. She released him with a gentle caress as he stepped back out of his clothing.

Her soft moan echoed his deeper one as he swept her into his arms. Griffin knew where he was going, knew her house as well as his own. He caught her lips as he lowered them both onto the plush blankets of Kora's bed. He settled over her, glorying in the incredible feel of her velvet soft skin beneath him.

He watched her eyes widen in the darkness as he shifted against her, gliding his hard shaft in the pool of her silken heat. Kora gasped, arching upward, begging without words for his possession. Griffin studied her, wondering if Kora understood, if she knew that this act bound them more tightly than any words ever could.

He poised to enter her, the reality of the wet warmth of her sending bolts of wild pleasure through him. His breath went ragged in the promise of bliss. Kora's eyes widened as though she suddenly understood. Griffin rocked against the tender flesh that begged for his touch, drawing a startled gasp from her.

"Say it," he growled.

For a moment, Kora stared up at him mutely, her eyes wide, her breath coming in ragged pants, her hips shifting against him.

"Say it, Kora," he whispered, pressing his mouth against her, drinking in her soft cry.

"I'm yours," she whispered breathlessly.

Griffin thrust home. A cry of surrender tore from

her lips as he filled her. Kora's entire body felt afire. The heat seemed to radiate out from where they were so deeply joined. Griffin held still above her, his eyes locked on hers, his lips feathering against hers every so often.

"Mine," he growled darkly as he shifted, thrusting hard and deep, settling his hands low on her hips and guiding Kora to the wild rhythm he set. Griffin groaned as fire licked along his nerve endings, the promise of release looming over him. He rocked their bodies together, nuzzling his lips against her neck down to the swell of her breast.

* * *

Kora gasped, the sensation of his body deep within her own new and yet familiar. She gasped each time he left her only to return, his hands moving over her skin, lighting tiny fires and soothing them away in the same caress.

His movements grew harsher, drawing wild cries from her lips as he ruthlessly rode her toward completion, his pleasure enhancing her own. His name fell from her lips in a breathless mantra.

The coil of pleasure drew tighter with each movement of his hips. Kora shuddered as he pushed her toward the edge. She tensed, grinding herself against Griffin, meeting each thrust with one of her own. Her breath grew increasingly ragged as the spiral of desire grew tighter. Kora cried out hoarsely as the spring suddenly broke, her world shattering around her. She clung to him as Griffin followed her

over the edge.

Kora opened her eyes slowly, staring at the dark ceiling above her bed. *It was another dream.* She drew in a slow breath, the air tinged with Griffin's scent. Kora ached as though she'd spent hours making love. *Maybe it wasn't a dream. Dreams didn't make you sore,* she reasoned. She shifted, her body protesting. Kora moaned, wondering what on earth had just happened to her.

She was still dressed in the clothes she'd worn when she saw Griffin the night before. Kora took a moment, trying to categorize everything that had been different about the dream last night. Her eyes widened as she recalled his mouth suckling hungrily on the skin just above her collarbone.

Kora forced herself to stand on shaking legs and walked to the vanity along the far wall. She flipped the light switch, closing her eyes against the sudden brightness. Glancing at herself in the mirror, she gasped in surprise. There was nothing there. She'd been so sure she'd find a mark, his mark.

This was getting ridiculous. Kora was losing the ability to tell the difference between the dreams and reality.

Chapter Five

Kora glanced behind her, a sigh forming on her lips. She rolled her eyes heavenward and fixed a blank expression on her face. *Just how many of them are there?* Apparently, the fact that she was keeping company with a shadow was starting to rub off on her. Kora could actually hear them, the sound of their feet hitting the pavement behind her, the difference of their sounds compared to all of the other walkers that came and went.

She should have parked closer. She'd given them the perfect chance to corner her. The sidewalk was already deserted, and while the shops were all still open, no one was going to interfere with members of Circle Luna. Kora had noticed that there seemed to be an unwritten rule. No one ever noticed when they were cruel, to her or to anyone else.

Kora stopped short, spinning to face them. She watched as they came up short, unprepared for her sudden stop.

"What on earth is it that you want?" she demanded, doubting they had spent the last two hours following her simply to insult her.

"We want you to join us," the blonde said. He

offered her a smile.

Something about it chilled her. Kora wished she knew his name. He'd been present the night she'd petitioned to join the circle.

"Really?" *I find that rather hard to believe.* She knew instinctively that it was more than that. They wanted something from her, her power — or Griffin.

"You have to understand. The night you came to the circle, you appeared completely mundane. If you had only told us you were a natural born."

The blonde spoke again, and Kora could tell he was worried, uncertain. He had expected her to jump at the chance to join the Circle, to fall into their open arms with never a thought to why. She was neither a fool nor desperate. Kora wouldn't act without questioning their sudden change of heart.

"Why?" she asked, keeping her voice cool, even. Better to have them believe Kora knew nothing about shadows and the Circle than to have them think of her as hostile.

"We believe that you would be an asset to the Circle. We also believe that we might be able to offer you the protection you need," the blonde said.

She wished she had his name, something to attach to the energy that swirled around him. "Protection? What exactly do I need protection from?"

"We do not wish to alarm you, but it appears that you've drawn the attention of a particularly nasty demon. He's already hooked quite deeply into your aura," the blonde explained, as if she was a foolish child.

Griffin — only Griffin was not a demon, and the

fact that they called him such made her wonder exactly what other creatures they hunted without cause simply because they did not meet whatever criteria the circle had set out for them.

“A demon? Why on earth would a demon choose me of all people to prey upon? More so, why would a Circle that had no place for me six months ago want to help me now?” Apparently Griffin was correct. The circle could sense the connection between them.

“You have a lot of untapped power. It draws the attention of creatures that view you as prey. One of these creatures is extremely dangerous. We could hardly call ourselves protectors if we allowed someone to be harmed so close to our center.”

The words were extremely smooth as though rehearsed, and a small part of her might have been tempted if Kora was not so strongly aware that their demon was the man she had grown to care very deeply for. They wanted Griffin, and they expected her to bring him.

“If what you say is true, it is nothing I can not rid myself of, if I so desire.”

“Kora, you should at least allow the elders to ascertain how much danger you’re in. I understand your reluctance to trust my words, but perhaps their words—” His tone was soothing, coaxing.

Kora fought the urge to roll her eyes. She could use this to her advantage. Perhaps, if she was allowed once more on to Circle Luna’s lands, she could figure out what sort of bells and whistles they had guarding the place. It would help Griffin in his efforts to aid Terrill. Plus, it would give her tangible proof that the

other shadow was alive. She might learn something that would make Griffin realize that she was not waiting for the right moment to betray him.

"I don't see what good it will do, but if it will get you to leave me alone, I will go. I would prefer to take my own car, if that is acceptable?" These men had given her no reason to trust them. She had no reason to believe that they would not name her a demon if it suited their purposes.

She would not allow herself to be used as bait for a trap. Her feelings for the shadow might be a confused muddle of passion, desire and fear, but Kora was certain that she was safer with Griffin than she would ever be with Luna.

"I understand," the blonde said. "Allow me to accompany you. It will make it easier. If it will ease your concern, I would give you my name," he said.

For just a moment, Kora wondered if genuine concern for her fed their actions. She dismissed the idea. It was true that names had power, but they didn't actually perceive Kora as any sort of threat. If they had, this fool wouldn't have tormented her every time she saw him.

"Your name, sir?"

"Gary."

She rolled her eyes then, unable to stop herself. "Charmed."

Kora was half tempted to inform them that she knew very well how to get there, that her memory of the night she petitioned the circle was fully intact despite their pitiful attempts to erase her knowledge, but that would make her a threat to them. What they

could not undo once, they could not undo again.

"I really don't have all evening to waste," Kora said, making sure she sounded perturbed. "My car is this way."

* * *

Kora tried to categorize all the things she saw. The grounds looked much the same. She hadn't really expected them to change. Kora scanned the buildings — a farmhouse, a barn, a machinery shed and milk house. She studied the four figures that walked toward them at an easy pace, unhurried as though they expected Kora to wait.

"I am glad you've decided to let us help you, Kora," the Circle's high priest said.

She recalled his face, but his name escaped her. The woman who had walked beside him was Lila, the Circle's current high priestess. The other two were unknown to her.

"She has not agreed to join us," Gary said before she could speak.

Kora glared darkly at the tall blonde. She hated being spoken for.

"No? I would think given the danger you are in, you would be most grateful for our protection," the high priest said coolly.

"I don't see any danger I can not take care of myself," Kora pointed out. She wanted them to understand that she knew herself to be capable of getting rid of Griffin if she wished. "What makes you think this *demon* is so dangerous?" She desperately

forced back the emotions that bubbled up at the thought of Griffin, not wanting to give them anything to use as leverage.

The high priest came forward and reached to take her hand in his own. Kora pulled her hand away from his before he touched her, clamping down on the energy around her, denying him the truth of her power. She allowed him to take her hand after a moment. He turned her hand palm up.

"I highly doubt you're going to find anything of use in those lines." Kora allowed humor to color her voice as she spoke the words, catching sight of a reluctant smile on the lips of the elder. She knew she'd succeeded in avoiding their detection. They still had no idea what Griffin was doing with her.

"I think perhaps it would be best if we showed you why this demon is so dangerous. We have one here. We believe that the one that follows you is his companion."

Kora caught her breath at the words, forcing down the sudden bubbling of excitement. Terrill was alive, which meant she and Griffin would be able to help him. She found herself wanting to reach for Griffin, wanting to share her news.

She followed the small group toward the milk house, realizing as they got closer that it was equipped with metal bars on the windows and a padlocked door. Kora held her breath as the lock was removed and the door pulled open.

The interior of the building was dark, dingy and ill kept. She could make out the form of a man, huddled away from the light. His clothing was in severe

disrepair. Kora thought she could see several deep rents in both skin and clothing. She felt her heart constrict when Terrill's head came up and he blinked gritty eyes at her.

Kora swallowed the cry of shock that formed in her throat. He felt like Griffin did; empty, hungry and pained. Kora felt the same tug to fill the emptiness, but it was like a candle flame to the burning ember of the sun, something Kora could deny and ignore with ease.

She found herself looking around the assembled group; two more women had joined the group, one a tall redhead, the other a dark-haired woman with jade green eyes. There was something in the way they studied the figure huddled against the wall that was different. There was worry, pity and some other emotion in their faces.

Kora turned back to the shadow, wanting more than anything to reach out and touch him, to ease the pain she could feel. She took a step closer, wondering if they would stop her.

"I would not touch him. It could be very dangerous, considering the fact that another of his brethren is already draining a great deal of energy off of you," Gary pointed out from behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder and took a step closer. Kora moved her eyes back to Terrill. She knelt down next to him on the dusty floor. His eyes widened, meeting hers in shock. Offering him a gentle smile, Kora reached out and touched his handcuffed wrist.

His eyes widened further as she created a

momentary link between their minds. It served two purposes. Kora could talk to him, and it would allow Terrill to replenish using her link to the earth.

Before she could do more than let him know she would help him, Kora was jerked forcefully away from him. Terrill's eyes were wide, staring up at her. Kora jerked away from Gary's touch.

"What are you doing?" the high priest demanded. "You could get yourself killed, allowing him to tap into you like that! I realize the emptiness is horrible, but you must not give in to the desire to ease it. That's how they work. It's how they trick you into killing yourself."

Kora pasted a look of utter fear and uncertainty on her face. "I didn't know. It was like drowning. I couldn't seem to stop once I touched him. It was losing myself." She sounded frightened, even to her own ears, and Kora realized that there was some fear inside her, in spite of herself — fear of what Terrill could do if she allowed it. Kora hoped he'd gotten enough to hold him over until they could get him out. At the moment, she had to pull herself together.

They hurried Kora away from the guardhouse, ushering her toward the main house. She allowed herself to be taken inside, her hands filled with a steaming cup of what smelled like chamomile tea. Kora nodded her thanks to the high priestess and settled herself into the high-backed chair she'd been led to. They were treating Kora as though she was breakable, and she supposed that to their way of thinking, she was.

"I am surprised you're still awake, given the

amount of energy you lost today,” the high priest pointed out.

Something in his tone made her stiffen.

“Why do you think that is?” he asked. There was a curious gleam in his gaze, a strange wicked edge, as though Kora was a particularly interesting new discovery.

A shiver trailed down her spine. “I don’t know,” she answered quietly.

“I wonder how much you can spare? My own studies into magical energy seem to imply that each person has only so much of the power. A single person could contain a cup full, or a small lake, or maybe even an entire ocean.”

Kora couldn’t stop her surprise from clouding her face. She’d heard this theory once before. Her Uncle had once had a similar conversation with her. He had informed Kora that he figured she possessed the equivalent of a small ocean bottled up inside her.

“I really don’t know. I was always under the impression that you draw energy up from the earth,” she said, carefully rephrasing the words from any number of books she had read on the craft growing up.

“Indeed, and most creatures have just such a connection with the earth. That shadow was once a man. His connection with the earth was severed, and he should have died, but instead he chose to feed off the life energy of others, feeding so deeply that he instilled in them the same hunger that drove him. Then there were two, then three, then who knows how many of these things exist. It’s not safe for

someone like you to be out there unprotected."

She looked away, not wanting them to know that they had hit a nerve. There was a part of Kora that would always wonder if it was magic or power that had drawn Griffin to her in the first place. Had her spell drawn them together or had it been her power? The question was foolish. She knew full well that the first dream had been created by her spell, and the subsequent ones had been mutual.

She felt it then, the slight tug on the shiny silver cording that connected them. Griffin was looking for her, and her absence was fast beginning to bother him. Kora would have found his wild thoughts funny, if not for the ever-present belief that she had already or would soon betray him.

Kora shifted, suddenly desperate to see Griffin. She knew the desire was his doing, the pull that was so strong she felt almost sick. "I have to go," Kora insisted, standing.

Both Gary and the high priest moved to stop her, and she glared at them.

"I don't want your help," she informed them. "What you're doing is inhuman. I've never felt anything so empty. I don't want any part in it." Kora forced her way past them.

She felt the rising of power behind her. Of course, the four of them were not a random thing. Four people were a circle, each acting as an element, each adding power to a spell cast in a moment. Kora spun on her heel and raised her hand in a staying motion. She felt the energy of the spell hit her shield. Kora staggered back, not prepared for the brunt of the

force. She glared at them, her sudden anger burning away the spell remnants.

"That was stupid. I won't stay and help you capture some poor shadow, and you try to put a binding on me?" She rolled her eyes at them, her contempt for them palpable. "You might be able to pick on creatures that can't defend themselves, but I most certainly can. If there is a shadow hooked into my aura, I assure you he's not taking anything I can't spare." Kora felt the edge of anger slowly recede, leaving her suddenly drained.

"We are only trying to help protect people from those creatures. They prey on the unwary," Gary protested.

Kora shook her head then met the gazes of the Circle elders. "Help? Maybe you should look into helping them instead of destroying them. If it was broken, it can be fixed." She turned and moved toward the doorway.

"Be careful, Witch, least your pride make you his prey," the elder said as she continued to walk away.

Those words again— Somehow they had lost their ability to shock. *Better his prey than your pawn.* Kora hurried through the outside door and down the steps. She could feel Griffin tugging wildly on their connection, worry and fear warring equally inside him. Kora reached out to him, assuring him she was fine, that everything would be fine.

Chapter Six

Somehow, Kora knew the question that was coming before it passed Griffin's lips. Kora hoped she was wrong, hoped that he didn't honestly believe so little of her, that he had learned something from their shared dreams.

The room was warm, cozy and lit by the shimmering, dancing flames of candles. The entire room was dark, decorated in deep colors, making the large space seem somehow smaller, maybe too small.

Kora had been angry when she'd gotten to his door, angry at being pulled toward him against her will, angry with Griffin for whatever the hell he'd done to her last night. Now she wished she'd left well enough alone, because for some reason, he took her anger to mean Kora had no concept of honor.

"Tell me. Are you going to join them? It is, after all, what you wanted."

Griffin said the words softly, but something in his tone told Kora to be very careful of how she answered him. He wasn't acting like himself, not at all like the dream Griffin she had gotten to know. A shiver passed through her. Maybe this was what he was really like. He had certainly been less than gentle the night before. His current state of barely-leashed

aggression sent cold fear spiraling through her. Kora tried to hide it, sensing her fear only seemed to agitate him more.

Something tugged at Kora's mind, a memory of something she'd read in the endless hours she spent in study during her training, something about shadows and their relationship with the moon. His words from the first night made sense now. She tried to remember what the moon had looked like when she had entered the house tonight.

Kora hadn't intended on coming. She was positive that he was the reason she had come in the first place. Griffin had called to her, a draw that she could not ignore. Kora wondered if it was the same for all the witches who found themselves in this situation. Did they all fall so deeply so quickly?

She shivered. Kora was in love. The very idea that she was in love with this man frightened her. It also intrigued her. How was it she had fallen down this path? Kora felt like a child who strayed off the known path into fairyland. Only here there were no fairies. Instead, there were creatures that looked like men and fed on the energy of others, because they could not draw it from the earth themselves. It should have frightened her. The simple fact that it did not worried her to no end.

Dreams bound them, and magic had wrought them — her magic. A spell cast in a moment of lonely weakness had brought all this about. Kora should never have done it, and nothing she seemed to do undid it. It was so simple — words woven in a rhyme, energies called and bent to her will. She had

unraveled the yarns of her spell only to find something deeper, something darker at its heart, something she had not created. A link had existed long before she'd cast her spell, a link that made her simple spell much more complex.

Kora shivered, angry with herself and with him, with Griffin's inability to simply give her the same trust she had placed in him. He could kill her if he so chose. There would be nothing she could do to stop him once the connection was created. It would be like slowly bleeding to death from a pinprick. Kora knew it and still she let him in her mind, in her soul.

Griffin shifted, reminding her that he still waited for her answer.

"Circle Luna can offer me nothing that I desire." Kora said the words slowly, holding his amber gaze with her own. She saw him draw in a slow breath.

He was testing her scent, seeing if she lied, if she bent the truth. All he had to do was look inside her mind, and he would know she told the truth. Damn him to hell for the doubt that she saw on his face!

"They could teach you things," he said quietly.

Kora sighed. Why on earth was he doing this? Why would Griffin point out to her a reason to go to them? Did he want her to? Did he want her to actually think about betraying him?

"What they could teach me, I do not wish to know."

"They know how to destroy my kind. Is that not something you would like to know?" he asked, his voice disinterested, as though he spoke of the weather of the night, not of ways to kill him.

She closed her eyes and forced down the rise of red-hot anger. "You don't trust me at all, do you?" Her voice shook slightly.

* * *

Griffin wanted to reassure her, to tell Kora that he trusted her. He was just not accustomed to having to show it. He wasn't used to being able to trust anyone. In truth, Griffin's doubt had little to do with Kora, and more to do with the nature of most of the witches he'd met.

"Believe it or not, I am not Nimue sent to bind you in a cave of crystal," she practically spat, her anger getting the better of her.

This town had been very unkind to Griffin and his brothers. Luna had destroyed most of his makeshift family and held one of them hostage in the hopes of drawing him out. It was hard to trust one who felt like a witch, acted like a witch and thought like one. Kora worked alone, but Griffin knew she wished to be part of a coven. It was a normal desire, to learn and teach. Of course he felt unable to trust her. Luna had offered her the keys to the kingdom, and she wanted him to believe that she would not take it. Trust was what had gotten Bryce killed and Terrill imprisoned.

"I suppose that is answer enough, isn't it," she said, standing.

Griffin froze, uncertain of her intentions.

Her eyes gleamed suspiciously in the golden glow of the candles he'd lit. Kora bit her bottom lip then drew in a shaky breath. "I—I am going now. I don't

expect I'll be seeing you again, unless of course you find you do indeed require my help for your plan." She turned and headed for the large oak doors of the sitting room, fully intent on leaving.

He could feel it in the link between them. Griffin could feel something else too. Kora was doing exactly what she said she would do. She was slowly unraveling the connection, upbraiding it with surprising ease.

"No," he gasped, reaching for the cording with heavy mental fingers. He stayed her actions, catching her arm in his own.

She glared at him. The heat of anger in her gaze surprised him. Kora had seemed almost nonchalant through all of this, taking it in stride, as if she often found herself sharing dreams with shadows and dealing with bindings that could not be unbound — except that she seemed able to undo what no one else could.

Kora shook off his hand, her eyes fairly blazing. "Look," she growled in annoyance, "I'll get Terrill out of there. You stay the hell away from Circle Luna, because if you get yourself caught, you're on your own." Her voice shook.

Griffin reached for her mind, wanting to assure himself that she wasn't speaking the truth, but all he found was seething anger that burned his questing mental fingers. "They won't let you leave with him," he pointed out, hoping to stall her. Kora was insane if she thought she could do alone what he could not.

She jerked on his hold, rolling her eyes when he refused to release her. Kora shook her head and

sighed. She was beautiful when she was angry, he decided. Her cheeks filled with a rosy hue, and her eyes snapped. Griffin suddenly wanted to kiss her, to drink in the strength of that emotion.

Her mouth was soft and pliant beneath his. Her lips parted readily, her free hand sliding around his hand to tug him closer. Kora's tongue played against his, sending shivers of desire through him. Griffin felt the moment she seemed to realize what she was doing. Her hand slipped away from his neck and pushed frantically at his chest. He released her after a moment, searching her slightly dazed expression.

Griffin studied her, still trapped by his hold on her arm. It was on the tip of his tongue to remind her that no matter how angry he was, her invitation had been given and taken, and nothing she could do could stop that. Words, once spoken, cannot be taken back, and actions, once enacted, cannot be undone.

It would be easy, even with anger seething through her, to simply bend that glorious temper to his will and bind her to him in a way that nothing could undo. Then trust would not be an issue, because he could not betray or be betrayed by his mate.

"Consider your invitation null and void, Shadow. I want nothing to do with you."

Her words were angry—and false. Griffin could feel that. Kora wanted him, just as he did her. Trust had little to do with desire. He could easily prove that, but Griffin could not risk pushing her further away.

He had to let her go. Kora was entitled to her anger, to her hurt. She deserved that much. The door

slammed, and moments later he heard the roar of her car coming to life. Griffin listened as she drove down the winding driveway. Kora would be back, if for no other reason than to tell him to stay the hell out of the dreams he had every intention of visiting. Trust or not, she belonged to him.

* * *

Kora sat in front of her altar, her eyes closed, her breaths slow and even. She could feel the burning heat of power running through her veins, power asked for and granted by the ancients. Everyone who came before her offered a little bit of themselves in order to strengthen her.

Easy. The cardinal directions burned and shimmered behind closed lids. Armor like many reflective mirrors surrounded her form, rendering her unseen to magic sight. No spell or warding would react as Kora passed. It was a bit of magic borrowed from the depths of some fantasy she'd read as a teen.

The energy pulsed around her like the caresses of a lover's hand. Kora knew without having to look that Griffin was there. He'd gotten himself captured the night before. Kora knew because he hadn't tried to enter her dreams last night, which meant he'd given up or he'd been rendered incapable. She had a sinking feeling it was the latter.

She should leave him there, just as she said she would. It would be harder to free Griffin, and the link would need to be unbraided completely in order for her to slip in without their notice. The prospect was disheartening. Griffin would try and stop her, even in

the weakened state he was in. Every time she'd attempted in the days since she'd stormed out of the Blackthorn mansion, his mental fingers had held her at bay.

Kora sighed, forcing herself to create shields he could not penetrate. She hadn't truly wished to keep him out, which was all the proof that she needed of her continued affection for the foolish shadow and his doubting heart.

It was slow, tedious work, taking far more time than she had to spare, and the braid attempted to reform almost immediately. Closing her eyes against the pain, Kora drew the base cord so tightly that it began to fray under the pressure, growing steadily weaker. She hoped it was enough, that it would not alert the circle if it was weak enough. She could not break it without knowing what it would do to him.

Kora felt like crying, the tears forming behind her eyes and begging for release, but she held herself in fierce check, forcing the emotions down. She moved toward the front of the house. Kora grabbed the small pouch that sat on her altar as she walked by it. She heard the click of crystals touching. She hoped she had brought enough. From what she could tell, both men were very weak. Griffin was stronger and hopefully would be able to aid her. From what Kora gleaned from her shadow's thoughts, Terrill was weak and dangerously depleted of resources.

She walked down her front stairs, passing by her next-door neighbor and laughing softly as the woman looked up but was unable to see her. The armor was working.

The drive over was quiet, as she had known it would be. No one seemed to be out tonight, which was all the better for her cause. Kora parked her car a half-mile from the farm house that was Luna's base of operations, knowing that they held the two men in what at one point must have been a tool shed.

As she walked closer to the edge of the Luna property, Kora easily caught sight of and penetrated the first set of wardings. She couldn't afford to set them off. Kora had to trick them into believing she belonged there, touching and rearranging the threads of the web to accept her as a bit of the natural world.

Once on the other side, she closed her eyes, praying for luck and strength. Kora was pretty sure she would need both, if she wanted to get them out. She moved toward the guardhouse. She could make out the forms of the two men sitting heavily against the wall.

Kora slipped around the front and pulled open the door. She heard both men shift sluggishly. There was no light, and she knew they wouldn't be able to see her. The cloaking she wore hid her from more than magical eyes. She dropped the bag of crystals on the floor between the two men and watched as they scrambled to reach them.

Griffin caught the long fluorite crystal she'd charged and gasped softly. "Kora." He whispered her name ever so softly, causing her to jump. "It's a trap," he rasped through parted lips.

"Yeah," She answered, feeling her heart begin to pound. Somehow, she wasn't surprised. Kora moved quickly over to Terrill and knelt by him. The deathly

pallor of his skin was darkening, the crystals healing energy easily filling the empty places in the shadow. She could see that Griffin looked to be in better shape by far.

“Get him out of here,” Griffin growled.

Kora stiffened. She was going to have to leave one of them. There was no way she could get them both out before the wards on the building reported her entrance. The others would wonder what the hell was going on, but it would not take them long to get from the clearing to the barns, which gave her little time to decide.

“Please. He can’t make it through much more of this.”

She closed her eyes against the choice she had. Griffin was right. Kora could feel it. Terrill was weak. Even after the crystals, he was weak. Biting back the desire to cry out the unfairness of it all, she leaned down and urged Terrill to his unsteady feet.

* * *

When her eyes met his, Griffin realized she knew what he’d done. There was no way to get them both out. The circle was too close, and the moment she left the building with Terrill, a thousand things would be set into motion.

Kora knelt down before Griffin, reaching toward him, her fingers trembling. Tears glimmered in her eyes. Griffin wanted to tell her it would be okay, that he was stronger than it appeared, that he would be able to get out — in time, but he wouldn’t give her

false hope. It would be too cruel if he was not able to reach her.

She leaned forward and caught his bloody, broken lips in a tender kiss. Griffin groaned, a combination and pain and pleasure shooting through his system. Her power shimmered against him, everywhere he touched her. His lips parted eagerly beneath hers, a harsh groan escaping his lips, as he tasted Kora's power once more. She drew back after a long breathless moment. Griffin stared up into her eyes.

Kora turned back to Terrill and offered him an arm, helping the other man toward the doorway. The moment she walked through the door, a proverbial bell sounded their escape. Griffin moved weakly toward the still open door. He followed slowly behind them, keeping Kora and Terrill in his sight, knowing he ran the risk of being destroyed.

The circle possessed a spell to do just that. Griffin could feel it building, the wild arc of energy that would end his existence. He could still taste Kora on his tongue. He concentrated on the bittersweet sensation of her lips against his, waiting for the spell to end his existence. She was too far away to stop it, if a single person could actually absorb a spell powered by thirteen.

Griffin felt it surround him, hot and stinging, pulling at him, unraveling the essence that made him, unmaking him from the inside out—piece by piece, strand by magical strand. A harsh cry lodged in his throat as darkness overcame him.

Epilogue

Griffin watched Kora from the shadows, ached for her in a way he had no words for. It shouldn't have been this way. He'd woken to find himself emptier than he had ever been. The place where Kora had resided inside him was empty, the tattered remnants of a link all that remained. Griffin groaned. Watching her was torture, a sweet, almost addictive torture. He was so close, he could smell the wonderful warm scent of her -- so close that sometimes he thought he could reach out and touch her.

Kora had been gone when he'd woken -- gone from the link and gone from his life, it seemed. He'd followed her as soon as he was able. Griffin could still sense her, still feel her. It was just not the same. The link was missing. He felt lost without it tugging at him, pulling him to her, and yet he was here, watching her like a thief.

Griffin wondered if there was someone here, someone whom she loved, someone who loved her. The thought ate at him. It had been almost five months. Kora had moved on with her life, as the new surroundings made plainly clear to him. Yet, she was

his, link or no link. Kora was his mate, his other half. She belonged with him.

He moved slowly. All she had to do was turn around, and she would see him. Griffin waited, holding his breath.

Kora turned, her long brown locks shifting and falling into her face as she moved. Her eyes widened, shock stealing the color from her face. "Griffin?" Her voice shook with surprise.

He reached for her, unable to stand being separated from her for another moment. As he pulled her tightly against him, her soft cry was muffled by the fabric of the sweater he wore. Her body trembled, wonderfully real in his embrace, her breath warm and wanted against his chest. Griffin nuzzled his nose into the wild tangle of brown hair, drawing in her scent. Gods above, he missed this — her, the feel of her, even her trembling. It took him a moment to realize she was crying, her hot tears soaking through the sweater and onto the front of his dress-shirt.

"Hey," Griffin whispered, not sure how to react to the tears, hoping they were good, fearing they were bad. "I didn't mean to make you cry," he whispered into her hair, terrified that she didn't want to see him.

Kora drew back, wiping at her teary eyes, a happy smile adorning her lips. "It's really good to see you awake," she said, her voice filled with warmth and concern. She pushed a single strand of hair away from her face, looking up at him. "How on earth did you find me?" she asked.

Griffin wanted to laugh. How indeed! By using a link that didn't seem to exist, following her scent on

the breeze. He'd just known she'd be here. It wasn't even as though he'd done something intelligent and asked someone. No, he'd gotten into his car and driven, following something he could not name.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, glancing toward the tiny house.

He sighed, wondering exactly how to answer that. Griffin had come to talk to her; to take her home were she belonged, if she agreed that she belonged with him.

"Why did you leave?"

He let out his breath, as she opened her mouth to speak then paused, closing it again. Kora clearly wanted to say something but wasn't sure how to. He felt his heart constrict. She was going to tell him that without the link there had been no reason to stay.

"I— I thought they would have told you." Kora looked nervous now, worried. She glanced up at him, holding his gaze, her green eyes wild. "Lucian thought my presence was stopping you from healing properly. Your energy kept trying to repair the link because I was so close, and you needed to heal. He was right, so I left, and then— I sort of figured when the link remained so weak that you decided you didn't want me." Her voice broke on the last word.

Not want you? Are you mad? The question seemed almost reasonable in the wake of what she'd just said. He couldn't even find the link to strengthen it. Griffin allowed his eyes to close, as he pulled her once more into his arms, needing her there. He gasped softly, pleasure wreaking his system at her nearness. Something shimmering and bright started to form. He

held her for a long moment, just basking in the warmth that seemed to steam from the slowly tightening cord between them.

* * *

What on earth was wrong with her? Obviously, he wanted to clear something up. Kora needed to get hold of herself. Was he worried she'd try and reestablish the link? She wasn't sure she could without his willingness, anyway. She gasped as her thoughts were interrupted by something she had never thought to feel again.

The link's tattered edges were slowly smoothing and forming new strands. Kora could feel it wrapping around them, through them. She drew back from him, looking up into his glowing amber gaze.

Griffin's mouth was hard, hungry, and wonderfully familiar when it took hers, stealing her breath and her ability to think in one shiver-inducing action. She drew back after a long moment, her eyes wide. His gaze was fixed on her lips, his hands flexing low on her back, holding her tightly against him, as if he feared she might pull away now that he had her where he wanted her to be.

Kora wished the link was stronger, so she wouldn't have to find the words to explain what she was feeling. She scrambled to locate them before he shattered her concentration yet again.

"Come on," he said suddenly.

"Come where?" she asked uncertainly. What was he doing? Griffin continued to pull on her hand, and

she had no choice but to follow. His car came into view, and her heart stopped. Was he asking what she thought he was? *Goddess, what in hell is he thinking?*

"I am thinking, that you've been away from home long enough," he said, stopping short and turning to face her.

"Home? I am home," she said, very softly.

"Then so am I," he stated.

She smiled, finally getting it, the wires uncrossing at last. Why couldn't Griffin just say he wanted to be wherever she was, or he wanted her to be where he was?

Kora started toward her front door, turning every so often, needing to reassure herself that he was indeed with her. She'd wanted this — *forever, it seemed like* — missing him in away she hadn't had words to describe. Griffin was here, and he wasn't a dream. He was real, and his touch felt wonderful against her skin.

Once inside, she pulled him into her arms, capturing his lips herself. She shivered as an arc of pure energy tore through her, the silver cording that had grown so sparse suddenly radiant with energy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fae Harlow lives in upstate NY with her two cats, Seraphin and Willow. She sees her parents just about every day, but most of her time is spent with a core group of friends, her circle or working and writing. Fae enjoys singing, sculpting, making jewelry, hiking, and reading.

Fae has always held with the idea that sometimes the thing you are looking for is in the last place you would expect. When all else fails, you can always find what you want by simply wandering around your home — or even a store — and letting your fingers lead you to it.

You can read more about Fae's Shadows — and her other books at her website:

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ISABELLA'S WAY

By

Lydia Parks

Nathan Cotton has been around for four hundred years. Although he doesn't regret his decision to become a vampire, he has no desire to condemn others to the same fate. He walks through the darkness alone, battling the devil within. Nathan's sensual nature, however, is impossible to hide, and he often shares more than just his bed. Occasionally, he even runs across someone who touches his cold heart.

Lydia Parks

Chapter One

Giant oaks lined the street, allowing only slivers of moonlight to reach the sidewalk. Old houses loomed on each side like sentries. Nathan inhaled to pick up scents of musty attics, budding azaleas, and nearby traffic. Already several blocks from his house and in no great hurry to reach the hospital for his weekly appearance in the blood lab, he was enjoying the night when he first felt it.

He stopped.

The skin below his jaw tingled, and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. What was that feeling?

Nathan's eyes widened as he remembered. It was something he hadn't felt in decades.

Another vampire. That's what it was — another of his kind.

He turned slowly, inspecting every shadow, but he found no one. There was no quick movement, no quiet sound, no peculiar scent.

Nevertheless, another vampire was near.

Nathan stepped into the heaviest shadow. He stood as motionless as the Sphinx waiting for the decades to pass.

A pair of teenagers walked up from the south,

holding hands and whispering plans for a rendezvous. A late-model sedan pulled into a driveway and a middle-aged woman climbed out, heaving a weary sigh. She walked into one of the houses and eased the door shut.

Several more people made unsuspecting appearances and then went away.

Nathan waited.

His patience was finally rewarded when a door he couldn't see opened and closed. The tingling sensation spread down his neck to his chest and back. High heels clicked on concrete, and a woman appeared from between two houses.

In mid-step, she froze. "Who's there?"

If she'd been merely human, he would have guessed her age at about twenty-five. As a vampire, she wasn't much older than that. He could feel her youth, smell the hint of mortality still clinging to her. It had been perhaps ten or twenty years since her entry into darkness, no more.

"Look, asshole, I know you're there. You tell Spike it isn't working."

She spoke quietly, but loud enough for a mortal to hear if he were standing close. She hadn't yet learned the art of vampire speech, that soft whisper that was quieter than human ears could make out.

The woman was attractive. She didn't have the height of a model, but everything about her was slender curves and graceful movement. Her dark hair was gathered up loosely on the back of her head. When she turned her face in his direction, Nathan saw plainly her golden-brown eyes and the smooth

lines of her face. Her luscious lips were bright red.

Yes, she was quite attractive. The tingle spread over the rest of him as he approached her.

The woman stepped defensively behind a well-used red car. "Look, I don't know who you are, but if Spike thinks—"

"My name is Nathan Cotton, and I have no idea who or what Spike is."

Her eyes narrowed. "Really?"

"Really." He stopped across the car from her. "And you are?"

She glanced around, as if looking for co-conspirators then leveled her stern gaze on him again. "Isabella."

"Isabella. Beautiful name."

She shrugged, her expression unreadable.

"I had no idea anyone *else* was in this neighborhood." Nathan walked around to the front of the car.

She stiffened. "You live here?"

"A few blocks away."

"Oh. And you really don't know Spike?"

"No, I don't. Is he one of us?"

"Yeah."

"And he lives in the city?"

She shook her head. "No, he's in Europe somewhere. I think."

Nathan leaned casually on the car. "I see."

Isabella wore skin-tight jeans and a short knit top that revealed a slice of pale skin and a pierced belly button. Her bare arms were slightly muscular and her wrists were adorned with numerous colorful

bracelets. A small gold purse hung from her shoulder, matching the heels she balanced on effortlessly. Very chic, very modern, and very sexy.

The tingle running over his skin suddenly sank much deeper. "Perhaps we should spend some time together, get to know each other. For the sake of being neighborly and all."

She studied him for several long minutes, her gaze covering every inch of him from head to toe. "Maybe we should." Then she withdrew keys from her small purse and unlocked the car door. "Come by tomorrow."

He straightened and nodded, watching her back the car down the driveway. Tires squealed and smoked as she took off.

"Tomorrow." Smiling, Nathan continued on his path, wondering what the following evening would hold. How long had it been since he'd spent time with one of his own? Fifty years? Sixty? Not since he'd been with Francine Dubois, the world-renowned actress.

Poor Francine. She shouldn't have been so carefree. Or maybe careless was more accurate.

* * *

Isabella paced her apartment, wringing her hands. Any minute now, the vampire would arrive. If it was like the night before, she'd know he was there before he found her door.

Nathan Cotton. It was a strange name to choose.

Granted, he was good-looking. And old. He wore

his age like a cloak. Nathan was a tall, lanky, green-eyed vampire with a hint of an English accent. It was typical of Spike to think he could get to her with a classy guy. He'd already tried everything else.

Isabella stopped at the open window. She wasn't so easily fooled.

A breeze blew in, lifting a magazine page and letting it fall. A cat ran by a floor below, yowling in protest at its imaginary pursuer.

Suddenly light-headed, Isabella gripped the windowsill.

He'd arrived.

"Isabella."

She swallowed hard and leaned out. "Up here."

He stepped around the corner of the house and glanced up at the window.

"Come on up."

His movements were silent in the darkness, but she felt him getting closer.

Isabella had one chance. Only the element of surprise could give her an edge. She was certainly no match for his age without it.

Flattening herself against the wall, she unlocked the door, then gripped the wooden stake tightly in both hands and raised it above her head. Light shining from the far side of the room would hold his attention for a moment. That was all she needed.

Closer. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, then climbed them. He knocked on the door.

Isabella closed her eyes. No matter what, she had to get him in one strike.

The door opened slowly. "Isabella?"

As he stepped in, she whirled around and brought the stake down with every ounce of strength.

It stopped.

"What are you doing?" Nathan held her wrist in one hand and frowned at her.

Isabella growled her frustration and yanked her hand free. Her second strike was even less effective. He ripped the stake from her grip.

"Please," he said. "This is no way to make a guest feel welcome."

Determined to at least inflict pain before he sent her into oblivion, she threw herself at him, fists flying.

He grabbed her and pinned her arms to her sides as he held her to him.

They stood together, and she couldn't ignore the strange sensations that touching him caused. His body was perfect and hard, as if chiseled from marble. Her insides quivered as they had when she was a girl, tasting her first kiss. "What... Who are you?"

He didn't answer for a long time as he stared down at her. His eyes were the green of clover, ringed with a hint of red around the iris. "I told you my name already."

She nodded. "Yeah. Nathan."

"Yes. Are you ready to treat me like a guest, or should I prepare for another attack?"

Isabella struggled against his grip. "Let go."

"Is it safe to do so?"

"Yeah, it's safe." She pushed against his chest and stumbled backwards when he released her.

Nathan stood in the doorway, the stake on the

floor at his feet. After closing the door, he reached down, picked up the sharpened piece of wood, and studied it. "Do you treat all your visitors this way?"

Isabella stepped back to the wall. "Only the ones who plan to do away with me."

He placed the stake on the top of a bookshelf and strolled around her studio apartment, studying it with a look she couldn't interpret. "I assure you, I have no such intention." He stopped in front of her. "In fact, I have quite a different plan."

As he reached out and touched the side of her neck, all the strength drained from her body. She leaned against the wall to keep from falling to the floor.

"Do you feel it?" he asked.

Isabella nodded. Whatever it was, she felt it.

He bent forward, pressing his lips to hers in a tender kiss that held all the mortality she'd forgotten existed in the world.

"I feel it, too," he whispered against her lips.

Isabella closed her eyes, wondering at the odd sense of weightlessness. Nathan's arm slid around her waist and drew her up, and she reached up to hold him.

His shoulders were wide and strong, yet he held her with the tenderness of a first-time lover.

She raised her face to his again and accepted his kiss, opening her mouth to draw him in.

A growl rose from his chest as he took her mouth greedily, his tongue swirling around hers, brushing over her incisors as if caressing them. A shiver ran down her spine, and her fangs suddenly grew in one

pleasant rush.

She clung to him as he pressed her to the wall, his hand pulling her thigh up to his side.

As he drew her tongue into his mouth, she found his fangs in the same state as hers, only longer and thicker. She locked her legs around his hips and discovered that he was also excited as a man. His mountainous hard-on pressed into her crotch.

Isabella growled, suddenly unable to think about anything but fucking him.

Nathan pulled his mouth away from hers.

"Yeah." She looked up at him again. "I *definitely* feel it."

He smiled, and she thought she might melt right then and there. The man had the most spectacular smile she'd ever seen.

But he wasn't a man, was he? He was a creature like herself, and capable of ending her existence.

As he carried her across the room, her legs still locked around him, her hands still clinging to his shoulders, she was surprised to realize that she had no fear left in her. Every ounce of it had been replaced with desire.

The tips of his fangs dented his bottom lip as he swiped the pile of clothes from her bed and lowered her to it beneath him. His jacket, shrugged away, fell to the floor. He kissed her again, this time as if he were a starving man at the dinner table.

Isabella felt the same hunger. She nipped his lips and tongue, and sucked hard.

Nathan's hands traveled up the side of her body, exploring, sliding along her skin and under her shirt,

caressing her breasts.

Human need swelled inside her at his touch, drawing a moan from her throat.

He raised himself up over her and looked down into her eyes. His smile was gone, replaced with something that bordered on desperation.

"You understand what I need?"

She nodded, unable to voice her own desire.

"You also understand what will happen?"

She nodded again. He was asking her permission. That was something new. Spike had simply taken what he wanted from her, never concerned with what he gave or what she thought about it.

"I've been in the darkness a long time." Nathan's voice grew deeper with each statement, roughened by lust.

Isabella nodded then reached up and drew his face down. His mouth matched hers as if made for it.

He held himself on one elbow and explored her body with one hand. His fingers expertly circled her nipple, rubbed back and forth across it, then twisted it, sending hunger shooting through her torso.

She tightened her legs around him.

His hand ran down her side, over her hips, and rounded her butt.

Again he tore his mouth from hers. "I don't know how you got those pants on, but I suggest you remove them if you don't want me to tear them off."

Nathan gave her just enough room to wriggle out of the jeans beneath him before drawing her legs back up around him.

"Better," he whispered.

His hard-on rubbed against her now, swelling more with the promise of pleasure. She was surprised that he kept his pants on, but not disappointed. As he gripped her thigh, pulled her bottom lip into his mouth, and rubbed the outline of his cock slowly up against her tingling clit, she groaned. Continuing the slow humping stroke, he moved his mouth to her neck and pressed the sharp tips of his fangs to her flesh.

Her body sang with anticipation. She gripped his shirt in both fists as the teasing went on.

Never had she felt such growing anticipation, such hunger and raw need. She spread her legs wider under him.

He drew her up against his cock, squeezing her bottom with cruel gentleness.

She wanted to feel him enter her, knowing somehow that the experience would be unlike any other. She craved the feel of his teeth sinking into her flesh, and needed to taste his excitement.

She longed for the sweet release.

As Nathan traced the side of her neck with his fangs, Isabella reached between them to free him from his clothing.

"Are you in a hurry?" he asked.

"Yes." She struggled with his pants button, unable to push it through the buttonhole.

The button popped loose, flew across the mattress, and bounced on the floor.

"Please," he said, raising himself to his elbow, "allow me to help."

As he removed his pants, she worked on his shirt.

Several more buttons flew off before she was able to push the shirt back from his shoulders.

His body was magnificent. Pale flesh covered lean muscles that bunched under her touch as he raised her tube top over her head and then shrugged his own shirt away.

They embraced as long-lost lovers, desperate to join and yet unwilling to waste the anticipation. He led her in a dance of seduction that was something she could never have imagined.

She wanted him desperately.

His cock was hard against the inside of her thighs, and large in her hand. As she stroked him, he groaned softly in her ear. She guided him to her hungry cunt and lifted herself against him.

Still he did not enter her.

"Not yet," he said. "I don't think you truly understand."

"I do understand. Take me now."

"No." He lifted himself out of her grip, but he didn't leave. Instead, he moved his mouth to her breasts and feasted on them one at a time. His teeth brushed against her tender flesh, yet never pierced it as he flicked her taut nipples with his tongue.

Isabella squirmed, anxious to move on. Her fangs pressed against her own lips as the beast rose in her, demanding to be fed. "Nathan." His name was a groan.

He stretched out on top of her again, took her hands in his, and held them to the bed on each side of her head.

"I have more memories than you can know. They'll

overwhelm you if you try to take them all at once. Just a taste first."

When he lowered his mouth to hers, she gasped at the nectar. He'd nicked his lip to offer her a taste, and she took it with enthusiasm. What would it be like to drink from someone so old?

The first jolt hit her like a bolt of lightning.

The world spun out of control as she stood alone and in the dark.

She stood in a vacuous theater. A movie played. Unfamiliar characters flew past her, whispering in strange languages and terrifying her.

The bottom of her theater dropped away and she fell, spinning, trying to grab anything that would save her. A horse fell past, and then a wolf. Graves. People. Women with blood dripping from their necks. Men with torches. Ships. More blood. Bodies. She reached out, clutching at cold, dark air.

A woman's pale hand grabbed hers, and she held it.

"Don't be afraid," the woman whispered. Then the woman began to tear the flesh from her own arm as she smiled.

Isabella shrieked and tried to get away. Still she fell, the woman falling after her now. She had to find a place to hide, to get away from the crazy woman whose flesh hung from her like ribbons. The woman laughed.

Isabella hit bottom.

As she sat up, she looked around at the dark green grass — soft and cool — and found herself alone. The fear disappeared, replaced by sensations of longing

and satisfaction rolling up and down her limbs. She'd never felt anything so pleasantly intense and lay back in the wet grass to enjoy it. Her only thought was *more*.

Chapter Two

Opening her eyes, she stared at the ceiling of her own room. Nathan held her in his arms and stroked her hair, his face pressed into the crook of her neck. "You're safe now," he whispered.

"What the hell was that?" Her voice sounded tinny.

"That was a taste of my darkness."

"Son of a bitch."

Nathan rolled to his side and propped his head on his hand. He studied her intently. "How old are you?"

She sat up, drew her bare legs up in front of her, and wrapped her arms protectively around her knees. "I was twenty-three when I, you know, died. That was eight years ago."

His eyebrows arched. "Younger than I thought."

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. How old are you?"

"Counting my time as a mortal, I've been on the earth for three-hundred and ninety-five years."

She sucked in a quick breath. "Holy shit."

He smiled. "Indeed."

She thought about all those years alone, and wondered if she would have held up so well. In spite of the pleasure, she also wondered if she really wanted another glimpse into his darkness. "Will it feel like that the next time, too?"

He shrugged. "It should get less powerful with each taste, until you've adjusted."

"All those things I saw —"

"Were manifestations of my past."

"Wow." She gulped as she released her knees and stretched out beside him again.

He reached over and touched the ring in her belly button. "Should I leave?"

She almost laughed at his concern then shook her head. "No."

He rolled back on top of her and kissed her cheek and chin and nose as he pushed her legs apart with his own.

She reached between them and found his cock hard again. The shaft was wide and long, large enough to make the lower half of her body quiver.

Closing her eyes, Isabella focused on the feel of Nathan's mouth, and recalled the sensations of excitement she'd experienced tasting his blood.

When he drew his fangs along her neck, her entire body turned to molten lava. She pressed her mouth to his shoulder and heard him groan.

"I can't wait much longer," he whispered in her ear.

"You don't have to," she whispered back. Her cunt swelled with needing him, and she shook with anticipation.

His hand slid between her legs and he stroked her clit expertly, lifting her hips completely from the bed by way of mortal pleasure. She approached the edge of a climax, wishing for release, knowing what it would require and ready once again.

"Now, Nathan, please."

"Drink only from my shoulder," he said.

She nodded, willing to do anything.

His cock started into her with wonderful pressure, pushing her apart, stretching her to accommodate its size.

She thrust up, wet, needing him, wanting all of him at once, and he met her thrust with his own.

"Yes," he hissed.

He took the flesh of her neck between his teeth as he thrust his cock deeper, taking her as his primal mate.

She dug her fingernails into the flesh of his back and cried out at the approach of the abyss. Her muscles tightened and her body stiffened.

Holding her down with his weight, he drew his cock from her and thrust it in again and again, unable to get enough of her, offering her all of him.

The beast filled her chest with tremendous hunger, need, desire.

Release.

As his fangs pushed into the flesh of her throat, she bit down on his shoulder, and ecstasy flooded her senses as her muscles pounded through the human orgasm.

The darkness swirled around them both now. She felt and tasted his triumph. His cock exploded inside

her as his darkness invaded her body. The longing, the desires, the loneliness, the deepest needs. She tasted his joy as she knew he tasted hers. She died in his arms and drew life from the death.

Deeper he went into her. His hands were her hands, feeling her flesh and his flesh as one, holding her to him, as she clung to him.

She lost the division between them.

The woman returned, the pale woman with dark eyes. Isabella felt her darkness as Nathan had felt it when the woman first drew him to her. She knew her name, now. Hannah. Sweet Hannah. Isabella wanted her as he had, his human desires for the vampire's body. She felt him lose himself in Hannah's lust. His seed, hot as it pumped from his body. Her fangs, piercing his skin for the first time. His life, drifting into nothingness.

Isabella jumped.

For the second time that night, she emerged from a strange inner world to find herself in her own bed.

This time she was alone.

"Nathan?" She sat up and looked around.

"Yes." He stood across the room, watching her. He'd put on his pants, but his upper body was still bare. Red holes in his shoulder glistened in the dimly lit room.

Raising her fingers to her neck, she found the matching holes, healing already. She shook her head to clear it, then took count of her limbs. They were all there, and they still tingled with indescribable pleasure.

Isabella stretched out across the bed on her side,

feeling like a housecat that had just been fed, wishing she could purr.

Nathan smiled as he approached the bed and sat near her. "Your name isn't really Isabella."

She frowned. "Yes, it is. At least, it is now."

"Why did you change it?"

Strange question. "Spike said to."

"When he brought you into the darkness." It wasn't a question. He knew her now, at least as well as she knew him.

She nodded as she sat up. "He said everyone does it." Narrowing her eyes, she studied him. "But you didn't."

"No."

"You mean, Spike lied about that?"

"He lied to you about a great many things, Isabella." Nathan reached out and pushed a strand of her hair back from her shoulder. "And he is no gentleman."

She laughed then covered her mouth. "Sorry. I'm afraid gentlemen disappeared from the Earth long before I met Spike."

He frowned.

"Most of them, anyway." She rose from the bed and searched the floor for the dress she wanted, then she pulled it on over her head.

He picked up his shirt, put it on, and buttoned what he could. Then he lifted his jacket from the floor and draped it over one of the two chairs. "Why do you live like this?"

"Like what?" She looked around, trying to decide what surprised him.

"In this clutter. And you're in an apartment over a garage, above ground."

"So? The windows are blacked out. And who cares about the clutter? It's not like I'll be here forever. I'm sure as hell not waiting around for Spike to find me."

Nathan's expression darkened. "He should be staked."

She sighed. "Yeah, if only it didn't mean I'd disappear, too."

"What?"

"You know, if the one who makes you dies—" She frowned at him. "That's not true either?"

He shook his head.

"Damn him." All those chances she'd had to do away with Spike, wasted!

Nathan looked around. "What will you do if a baseball shatters one of the windows during the day?"

Isabella stared at the closest window, trying to imagine sunlight streaming through it. "I hadn't thought of that." Then she turned an angry frown on the man who was criticizing her. Vampire or not, he had no right to talk to her this way. "It's none of your damn business. Besides, it's all I can afford."

"What do you mean?"

She threw her hands up in exasperation. "It isn't easy holding down a job when you can only work nights."

Nathan crossed the room and stood directly in front of her, frowning. "Work? Why would you—" He drew back, his frown fading to astonishment. "Hasn't anyone shown you how to use your

powers?"

"What powers?"

He turned and walked toward the door, his fingers pressed to his forehead. Then he stopped and turned back to her. "How have you survived this long?"

Anger welled in her chest. "I can take care of myself just fine. I sure as hell don't need some older, *wiser* vampire showing me how to get around in the dark. You can leave now."

She jumped when he suddenly appeared in front of her.

"How —"

His expression was now one of tenderness, and he touched her cheek. "Sweet Isabella," he whispered. He pressed a quick kiss to her forehead, then smiled down at her. "I'll be back tomorrow, after we've both rested. We have some things to discuss."

"Who says you can come back —"

He silenced her by gently touching her lips, and her anger melted. He was incredibly tender, and amazingly gorgeous. "I'll be back tomorrow night."

She nodded.

Nathan grabbed his jacket from the chair, then walked out of her apartment.

Leaning over the windowsill, she watched him stroll down the driveway and disappear into the night.

Why couldn't he have been the one to make her into a vampire? It might have been an enjoyable experience.

And why did she have a desire to follow him home? That was dangerous.

As soon as she let herself care about him, he'd hurt her just like all the rest had, both before and after her change.

Just like Spike.

No, she wouldn't put herself through that again, no matter how good Nathan made her feel.

Straightening, she frowned at the window. Maybe she should look around for something to cover it with so it wouldn't matter if a kid broke the glass with a baseball.

* * *

Nathan stretched out on his bed, folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes as dawn approached. He thought about Isabella. Maybe she'd been right to change her name. She wasn't Betty Miller from Iowa anymore. She was Isabella, the truly magnificent creature of the night.

My creature of the night.

Now that Nathan had tasted her blood, she was his responsibility. He'd have to do what the slimy little thief Spike hadn't done and show her how to survive.

Spike. He'd tasted her fear. The snake of a man was cruel and selfish. He didn't deserve to live in either the light or the darkness. If Nathan ever ran across dear ol' Spike, he'd make sure the bastard was erased completely from the future.

But for now he'd sleep and enjoy what remained of Isabella in his blood. She remembered the sunlight, something he'd long forgotten. She knew the way it warmed her shoulders and the top of her head.

Nathan smiled.

Holding Isabella in his thoughts, making love to her as a man, drinking from her as a vampire, he slept.

But Isabella wasn't the only female in his dreams that night. Francine Dubois came to haunt him, as so many others often did.

Dear Francine. She'd been the toast of Paris when he first saw her perform on the stage. With her vampire abilities, she amazed her audience. Nathan was both entranced and appalled by her willingness to show off.

Nathan relived the last night they'd spent together, in all its glory and joy. He'd swept into her dressing room after the performance and found her at her makeup table, the blue silk dressing gown open to reveal her rounded body to him as she wiped her face.

He kicked the door closed, rushed to her, and kissed her shoulder. The anticipation of making love to her was nearly unbearable in spite of his concern. "Francine, you must be more careful out there. Someone's going to figure out what you are."

"Nathan, darling, say hello to Michelle."

Straightening, he was startled by the appearance of a young woman across the room. She watched them, smiling nervously. Her cheeks were hollow but rosy, and her hair was a wild mass of brown curls. She looked very young.

"*Bon jour*," she said.

Nathan nodded, then glanced questioningly at Francine's reflection.

"Our dear little Michelle wants to join us tonight. Are you not pleased with my surprise?"

He frowned. "She's a child."

Francine laughed. "Hardly. She's earned a living on the streets of Paris for five years. She's definitely not a child." She spun around in her chair and began to unbutton his shirt. "Besides, I've paid her well. And we know this will be a night she'll be sorry she must forget."

Francine nipped playfully at his stomach as she unfastened his pants.

"My dear," he said, lifting her face to gaze into her blue eyes. "Shouldn't we go to your flat? This is your dressing room. Someone may hear us."

She laughed again. "We'll just have to be quiet. I love a good challenge."

Nathan's reservations quickly disappeared under Francine's attention, especially with Michelle's help. As the young prostitute knelt in front of him, her hot mouth wrapped around his swelling cock, Francine drew thin red lines across his shoulders with her teeth, not quite breaking the skin.

"Dear, God." He shuddered.

"God has nothing to do with it," Francine whispered.

All fears of being overheard vanished. He urged Michelle to her feet, drew Francine into his arms, and the three of them fell onto the divan and sent it crashing into the wall.

Chapter Three

Nathan woke with a start. He'd slept well past sunset. Isabella would be waiting. He jumped up, showered and dressed, then emerged from his underground apartment through the trap door into his living room. Nathan didn't even bother to light a lamp as he rushed to the refrigerator, emptied two pints of hospital special and hurried from the house. He made it the four blocks without noticing a single detail of what he'd passed.

Nathan stopped at the base of the stairs to Isabella's apartment.

Surprised by what he heard and sensed, he staggered back a step.

Surprise changed to fury. He charged up the stairs and burst through the door. She hadn't even bothered to lock it.

"Nathan." Isabella looked up from her bed, only mildly surprised by his appearance. She straddled a mortal man, who was stunned into momentary silence as she moved off of him. "You're early."

"Hey, what the hell—" The young man sat up in bed, glistening with sweat. His blond hair was wild, and his cock was hard. Blood pumped loudly through

his veins.

"It's okay, baby," Isabella said, putting her hand over his mouth. "He's a friend of mine." She crawled across the bed, stood, and placed a hand on Nathan's chest. Her naked body was beautiful in the candlelight. "Haven't you ever heard of knocking?"

"What are doing?" he whispered.

"Making a little cash, you know?" She lowered her voice to whisper back. "Besides, I'm hungry. He's dinner."

"What?"

"You know, food? Blood? Vampire meets mortal? Don't worry, he'll fit in the trunk of my car, and there's a lake across town. No big deal."

"You plan to kill him?"

She shrugged. "Yeah."

"You've done this before?"

"Sure. How else am I supposed to survive? It's not my fault I'm like this."

The young man moved in their direction. "What's going on? What are you two whispering about?"

Isabella smiled sweetly at him. "Nothing, baby. Don't worry." Then she looked back at Nathan. "You plan to watch, or split?"

He held her wrist and pulled her closer. "There are other ways. You can drink from him without killing him."

Her eyebrows went up. "Oh, yeah? But then he'd know about me."

"You can make him forget."

"I can?"

Nathan nodded. "With a little training."

She looked back at her intended victim, then focused on Nathan again. "When do we start?"

He glanced over her shoulder at the young man who had no idea how close he'd just come to dying. "Now would be good."

She shrugged and returned to the bed. "Davy, my friend wants to join us. Okay?"

"What?" The young man swung his legs over the side of the bed and jumped to his feet. "I didn't come here to —"

Nathan focused his thoughts quickly into the middle of Davy's forehead. "It's all right. Just relax."

The young man sat on the bed, then stretched out and lay with his hands at his sides and stared at the ceiling. His rather sizable cock was now limp.

"Cool." Isabella waved her hand back and forth in front of Davy's eyes. "How'd you do that?"

"It's a matter of concentration."

She smiled up at him. "Aren't you going to climb in?"

Knowing the amazing pleasure he could be about to experience if everything went well, Nathan shuddered as he quickly removed his clothes. "Yes, my dear, I think I will."

He sat on the edge of the bed and stroked Isabella's arm. "You need to understand how to project your thoughts. Think about getting Davy to raise his right hand."

Isabella sat back on her feet, squinted her eyes, and stared at Davy.

Nothing happened.

Nathan shook his head. "You're giving him a

command. Try thinking of yourself as him, of how it would feel to lift your own hand, and focus that thought right here." He touched the center of Davy's forehead.

She tried again. Her eyes took on a faint red glow.

Davy's fingers twitched, and his hand slowly raised several inches. Then it fell to the bed.

Isabella beamed at Nathan. "I did it."

He nodded.

"What else can I make him do?"

"Whatever you want," he said. "But you must be careful. If you put too many of your own thoughts in his head, he'll lose himself, possibly forever."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Wow." She leaned forward and brushed Davy's hair from his face. "Why is he so still?"

"I gave him a feeling of total relaxation and peace."

She glanced at the young man's cock. "Maybe he's a little too relaxed."

Nathan laughed as he stretched out on his side. "I think you know how to take care of that situation. I'll release my hold on him a little at a time. Otherwise, he'll never be satisfied." He stroked the tender back of her thigh, enjoying the curve of her buttocks. "And we definitely want him satisfied."

"Do we?"

He grinned. "Oh, yes."

Isabella sat between them, took Davy's cock in her hand, and kissed Nathan. He enjoyed her taste tremendously, and luxuriously stroked his own growing organ in response. It wasn't long before he and his human counterpart were both fully erect.

"Ride him," Nathan said. "Take him to the brink. But whatever you do, don't bite him. And don't let him come."

He watched her mount Davy, taking his stiff cock into her slowly, swallowing him with her body. When Nathan released some of his mental hold on the young man, Davy's back arched and his eyes closed. "Oh, fuck, that's good," he whispered.

Isabella held Davy's shoulders, raised herself to the very top of his engorged shaft, then lowered herself back down. Davy reached up for her waist to help speed her movements.

The human's muscles bulged as he lifted Isabella and pulled her down fast. Blood pumped through his veins, filling the room with a frantic beat. His cock grew as he neared a climax, searching desperately for the depths of Isabella in order to fill her with his seed.

Watching their coupling brought Nathan closer to his own brink of release. His fangs dropped to their full length and pleasantly ached. Yes, he would taste Davy's desire as boiling emotions, primitive and base – the drive to mate, the hunger for fulfillment.

Isabella's head went back as she enjoyed fucking the human. The sight of her fangs in her open mouth caused Nathan's cock to swell even more. He stroked himself faster as he enjoyed the way her body moved, undulating, her nipples standing out as dark points, the muscles of her legs and arms tightening into ropes with each movement.

She looked much as young Michelle had as she'd ridden him, her cunt tightening around his cock. He'd enjoyed her constricting heat as she worked herself

back and forth on him, approaching a climax she obviously hadn't expected.

Francine had delighted in watching them, waiting for just the right moment. "Now," she'd said. "Mount her now."

He'd lifted Michelle, draped her over the front of the divan on her stomach, and, dropping to his knees, driven his cock into her. She'd cried out, gripping the green velvet. "Deeper, yes, deeper."

As her muscles began to pulse around him, pulling him into her, he lifted her body with his arm around her waist and sank his fangs into her shoulder, drawing the sweet nectar that pushed him over the edge. Need, thirst, hunger, all at once filled with driving desire—human desire—sent him into oblivion. As he'd held her, pumping his seed into her, thrilling to the hot, dripping pleasure, he'd felt the pierce of his own flesh, and his pleasure doubled.

He growled.

Francine drew the taste of human ecstasy and vampire release from him as he pumped harder. She held him, her body writhing against his back. As he withdrew his fangs from Michelle, Francine held her wrist to his mouth and he tasted his own joy in her release. Eternal pleasure, circling through them. Never to end. Tying them together.

"He's — close."

Isabella leaned forward, responding to the draw of Davy's blood.

Nathan rolled onto his back and moved to the human's side. "Come to me now. Finish him as you fuck me, and taste his blood when he comes."

She did as instructed, moving quickly from Davy to Nathan in spite of Davy's attempt to hold her back, impaling herself urgently on Nathan's hard cock. She rode cruelly as she stroked Davy with her hand.

The young man cried out as he came, filling the air with the musky scent of his hot semen. Life, urgent need.

Isabella leaned forward and bit his neck, and he gasped and cried out again, his pleasure heightened.

Nathan waited as long as he could, enjoying the pulses of Isabella's climax, until Davy's heartbeat slowed and quieted.

"Enough." As he pulled her hungry mouth to his shoulder, he rolled them both over and sank his fangs into the sweet flesh of her neck.

Davy's excitement, exploding joy, primal urges, rushed into him, drawing him into a glorious release. He drove his cock into her, and she came again, taking the pleasure from him this time.

As they thrust against each other, their bodies and minds fused, the waves of bliss went on and on. Circling. Eternal. Never ending.

After the last of the orgasm faded, Nathan rolled to his side and held Isabella through the aftereffects. He knew she would be gone for several minutes at least. The first time it had taken hours for her to return.

He admired the heavy lines of Davy's body in repose, remembering what it was like to be young and virile, aware of attracting women's gazes and thrilling to the chase of the fairer sex.

Isabella awoke with soft sounds of satisfaction on her lips.

Nathan kissed those lips, enjoying a moment of tenderness.

She stretched against him. "That was amazing."

He nodded.

"And he's still alive?"

Nathan listened to the soft but steady heartbeat. "Yes."

"What do we do with him?"

Nathan kissed her once more before rising. "Where did you find him?"

Isabella swung her legs over the side and sat up. "I met him outside the Back Room."

"The Back Room?"

She gestured with her head. "A bar down the street."

"Does he have a vehicle?"

She nodded. "The black pickup that's out front."

Nathan pulled on his pants and shirt. "We'll put him in the truck and drive him back to the bar. I'll suggest he forget tonight completely, and when he wakes up he'll just go home, wondering how much he drank before he passed out."

She smiled. "I like that."

He stopped and studied the young woman, catching the glint of light from the gold ring in her belly button. "There are a few mortals that we call resisters because they aren't easy to manipulate. If you insist on bringing people here instead of finding another place, you run the risk of exposure when one of them wakes up and remembers."

She jumped to her feet, anger flashing in her eyes. "Look, I don't need your advice. I've been doing just

fine up until now. If he wakes up and remembers, that'll be your fault. I planned to kill him."

Nathan bit back a nasty retort. "I'm only trying to help you, Isabella. I've made it through a few more years than you have."

"Yeah? Well, you probably live in a sterile dungeon somewhere." She picked up a pair of shorts and a sleeveless shirt from the floor. "I like my life just like it is."

Her comment about the dungeon was a little too close to the truth. His hands curled into fists. "I suggest we take care of this matter," he said, pointing to Davy. "We can finish the argument later."

"The *argument's* already finished. You're not my goddamn guardian."

"Fortunately."

The young woman was impossible. He only wanted to help her survive in the world she seemed to know nothing about, and she was ready to take his head off.

Fine.

They worked in silence to dress their victim, then Nathan carried him quickly to the truck. Isabella drove while Nathan planted thoughts of confusing, drunken sleep in the man's brain. It would probably be the middle of the day before Davy returned to consciousness. He'd just donated a very large amount of blood.

At the bar, they moved Davy behind the wheel then walked together back to the street. By that time, Nathan had started to regret the harsh words that had passed between them. Isabella was feisty if nothing

else. That was one of the characteristics that attracted him to her.

"Would you like to spend the day in my sterile dungeon?"

She looked up and her anger faded to amusement. "Sounds real tempting, but I think I'll pass."

Nathan nodded, trying to hide his disappointment. He'd bide his time and find more subtle methods of instruction. It would be easy to enjoy a few decades fucking Isabella every night, if they could manage not to argue afterwards. Maybe he'd been alone too long.

Back at her apartment, she took up a position at the window, as if waiting for him to get his coat and leave.

Nathan put his jacket on, then stood behind her, running his hands up and down her bare arms. "Perhaps tomorrow night we should try something a little different."

"Like what?" She glanced at him without turning.

It would be a challenge to keep her amused. "If we find a couple already warmed up, we could invade their bed and take advantage of both of them."

She smiled, one eyebrow raised. "There's a motel about a mile down the road."

He nodded.

Yes, it would be interesting to have Isabella and a human couple, and no doubt enjoyable.

He kissed her neck, fighting back the urge to pierce her skin again. Too much at once and they'd quickly tire of each other. "Tomorrow," he whispered. Then he hurried outside and down the stairs.

On the dark, quiet sidewalk, he felt her and

thought for a moment that she had followed him, but when he looked back he didn't see her. Maybe she'd watched him from her door, and their link was simply stronger now.

Pleasantly stronger.

Smiling to himself, Nathan shoved his hands in his pockets and strolled home through the soft night.

Chapter Four

When he woke the following evening, Nathan was surprised by the storm rolling through town. Thunder shook the house above him, and rain pounded his roof.

He dressed and fed, waiting to see if the storm would subside, but it showed no signs of doing so. He stood in front of the living room window, watching the river of water flowing down the side of the street, thinking about Isabella. He would enjoy having sex with her while lightning flashed and rain beat against the window. Maybe they should have a quick round together before starting out in search of amusement.

Yes, just the two of them, tasting the desire in each other as they fell into the pit of lust together. His cock hardened, picturing the scene. Isabella's little gold ring would rub against his stomach as she impaled herself on his aching cock and locked him in her legs. They would sit together on her bed with the storm raging around them, humping in a lazy rhythm until they couldn't stand the pleasure anymore. She'd pull his mouth to her neck...

Growling, Nathan extracted his cloak from the closet, wrapped it around him, and ran from his

house in the rain. He moved so fast that he was barely wet when he stopped under a large tree at the bottom of the driveway to her apartment.

Something was wrong.

He didn't feel her at all. Not even a hint. Had she left for the night without him?

He closed his eyes as a memory invaded his brain.

"Francine," he called through the door. "Let me in."

It was the night after their encounter with Michelle, and he'd spent the day with a fever for Francine's body, longing for sunset. It was barely dark outside, but he was sure she'd be at the theater. Her show started in less than twenty minutes. He planned to take her quickly against the dressing room wall so she'd still have time to get ready for the show. Then later, they'd savor a slow, luxurious union. Perhaps they'd even invite another human to join them.

"Francine." He tapped on the door, but she didn't answer.

Something was wrong.

As panic swelled in his dead heart, Nathan twisted the doorknob, snapped the lock, and flung the door open.

He staggered against the doorframe at the sight.

Francine lay on the divan, her arms flung out, a wooden stake protruding from her chest. Her face had aged to that of an old woman, and her breasts sagged beneath her silk dressing gown.

Dropping to his knees beside her, Nathan yanked the stake from her heart and flung it across the room. "No, Francine, please don't go."

But it was too late. As he watched, the wrinkles in her face deepened, and her hair fell out around her head. A patch of skin peeled away from her chin.

He moaned in grief and closed his eyes.

The noise of a heart pounding in fear pulled him around. He stared at the man who stood cowering against the far wall, his eyes wide, a wooden mallet in one hand. His whiskered, weather-beaten face hinted at years on the street.

"Why?" Nathan rasped.

The man pointed a shaky finger at Francine. "S-s-she hurt one of my girls. S-s-she's a monster. Y-y-you—"

Footsteps in the hall brought Nathan quickly to his feet. He dashed through the door and into the darkness.

Lightning flashed, pulling him from his horrid reverie. Isabella's car was parked at the end of the driveway, and his sense of dread grew. She wouldn't leave without it.

Glancing around, Nathan assured himself that he was alone, then dashed through the rain and silently climbed the stairs. Her door—not surprisingly—wasn't locked.

Inside, he found the stake where he'd left it on top of the bookshelf. Clothes cluttered the floor as before, and the bed was empty.

He stood in the room and turned a slow circle. There wasn't quite as much of a mess. She'd taken a few of the clothes and books with her, but not all. She must have left in a hurry.

He walked to the mirror, studying the message

scrawled in lipstick. "Nathan, gotta go. Things to do. See you around. Love, Isabella."

And that was it. She was gone.

He shed his dripping cloak, draped it over a chair, and sat on the edge of her bed. At least she was still out there somewhere.

He pictured the surprise on her face when he'd interrupted her encounter with Davy. There was no chance she'd last four centuries.

Then he remembered the way her body moved with wicked pleasure as she rode the human.

She was strong-willed, if nothing else. And she knew how to enjoy herself. Maybe she'd make it long enough for them to cross paths again. "See you around, Isabella."

* * *

Nathan wasn't sure how long he sat on Isabella's bed, but the storm had subsided by the time he stirred. Rain dripped from rusting gutters over the windows, and someone in an adjacent apartment opened a window to fill the night with music.

As he rose, the feeling hit him again, starting at the base of his neck and sliding down his spine. "Isabella." He hurried to the door with her name on his lips.

But Nathan stopped with his hand on the doorknob.

It wasn't Isabella he felt.

A car engine died in the driveway and a car door opened and slammed. Heavy footsteps echoed up the

driveway, and then thudded on the stairs.

Nathan grabbed the stake from the top of the bookshelf, stepped quickly across the room, and stood with the stake hidden at his side.

When the door opened, he recognized the beast who stood in the doorway, a sneer frozen on his ugly face by confusion. This was the man he'd seen in Isabella's memories.

This was Spike.

"Who the hell are you?" he growled.

Nathan tried to hide his grin, but he didn't succeed.

Spike glanced around the room before focusing on Nathan again. "Where the hell is she?"

"I assume that you're asking about Isabella." Nathan stepped forward, his fingers tightening around the shaft of wood.

"Yeah." Spike's eyes narrowed as he also moved forward. "You're one of us."

"One of *you*? No."

"Bullshit. I can tell." Spike squared his leather-clad shoulders, drawing himself up as tall as possible. He smelled like the beast that he was.

"No." Nathan stopped an arm's length from his adversary. "I am a vampire. You are lowlife scum. A mere worm."

Spike seemed to realize he was up against something he didn't understand, because he started to retreat.

Nathan rushed past him to the doorway, taking him by surprise.

Spike spun around to face him. "Look, I don't

know what you think you're doing, but I'm here to get Isabella. She's mine. I made her."

Anger swelled in Nathan's chest. "By *making* her, you became her protector, not her owner. You relinquished that responsibility the first time you lied to her." He jumped, whipping Spike around and encircling the foul beast with an arm around his neck. "And you relinquished the right to exist the first time you raped her."

Spike was large, but young, and his protests were as useless as those of a fly in a web.

Nathan drove the stake through the bastard's heart, enjoying the muffled screams and writhing, until he felt Spike's body go limp.

After dropping the body to the floor, Nathan returned to his place on the edge of the bed. He'd watch Spike decay for awhile before loading him into the trunk of his own car. There was a lake across town that would swallow the remains of beast and car, and hide them from prying eyes.

"You're free," he whispered to Isabella. Maybe, wherever she was, she felt the freedom.

He hoped so.

Nathan was sure now that they would meet again.

He smiled.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lydia Parks grew up in New Orleans, the city of sin and vampires. Although she left her hometown years ago, she carries an appreciation of the dark side of life. Lydia lives in the Southwest US where she works a regular day job as an engineer, and she spends the evenings and weekends writing erotica. Visit her webpage at:

www.sarahstorme.com/LydiaParks.htm

FAIR CATCHING

By

Brenna Lyons

When I suggested that eXtasy might want to put out a few anthologies and showcase new talent we knew about, I never dreamed that I would be drafted into running the show for the first-ever eXtasy anthology. I commented that I would be willing to oversee anthologies in fantasy, paranormal, shapeshifter, and vampire. Vampires brought people out of the woodwork. I have been very lucky in working with Fae Harlow and Lydia Parks. These are two fantastic ladies to work with, and we played ideas off of each other wonderfully.

We decided going into this project that we would not concern ourselves with conventional Bram Stoker-style vampires. Since each of us had books already written or in the process of being written in our own vampire universes, we chose a character from our world and let loose the imagination on what that character wanted to tell us today.

In my case, I chose Veriel (aka Jörg) from my NIGHT WARRIORS series. Jörg is an interesting character, villain in some books and a hero in others. I will fully admit that he is a tarnished hero at best. He doesn't always make the right choices, and he's a desperate man. I do promise that he finds his own brand of peace in time, but at the time of this story, he is still chasing the soul of his bride from one encounter to another. I hope you enjoy Jörg and Caitrina.

Brenna Lyons

Dedicated to

My husband, my one and only soulmate. But, no one ever said that soulmates were easy. They are simply worth the effort they require.

Chapter One

October 1st, 1497

Regana

As the mother of all, proudly she stands.
The stone knows her secrets as no man
can.

Happiness and love she holds in her
hands.

Heedless of laws that control every man,
The flames of passion her loveliness fans,
Drawing her lovers to deepest desire.
Silken hair dark as night and heart of pure
fire.

Caitrina de Leon stared at her reflection in the mirror as her lady's maid, Jacquine, fussed with her hair, arranging it in curls cascading from the clips high on the back of her head. Her hair was black as a moonless night in the deep wood, much darker than either her mother's or father's hair had ever been.

She sighed as the maid continued to pull and puff at her hair. "What does it matter, Jacquine?"

"It won't be so bad, mi'lady."

Her brows shot up over deep blue eyes and rosy cheeks. "Not so bad?" she replied testily, letting loose a bit of the temper her father always warned her to control. "Father has taken leave of his senses."

"Lord Schmeidt is a well-acquainted gentleman," Jacqueline chided her gently. "Your father obviously felt his offer was a good one."

"Everything was arranged with Jacque. Why would Father end that agreement now?" *And accept a lord from a far-off estate in Southern Germany?*

"There are rumors of that," Jacqueline whispered in a conspiratorial tone.

"Of what?"

"Lord Cambion's — tastes ran to things best bought in dockside taverns, I hear. It took quite a lot of money to cover up the mess when one of his male — friends was injured in their play."

Caitrina screwed up her face in disgust. Was there no decent, sane man left in the world? "Damn the man!"

"Mi'lady," she gasped. "If your father hears —"

"I care not, Jacqueline. I am not a hound or horse to be passed hand to hand this way," she asserted.

"You've hardly been handled, mi'lady. To hear you tell it —"

Caitrina waved her hand in dismissal. "It matters not. I had an agreement with Jacque. He abused my trust."

"You cared not at all for him," Jacqueline reasoned. "Perhaps it is providence that he will not be your husband."

"At least I knew him." *At least he was of my own country.* "Betrothed to a man I've never set eyes on," she fumed. "I thought Father thought better of me."

"He does. Your father dotes on you, mi'lady."

A brisk knock came at the door, and Caitrina stiffened her spine.

"It is time," Jacquine whispered.

"I am well aware of that."

Caitrina stood and strode to the door, her skirts rustling as if whipped by a strong wind. She didn't wait for her father's servant to lead her to her doom. Lord Jörg de Schmeidt would find that Caitrina de Leon was not a lamb to be bullied by dogs.

She entered her father's study with her head held high and her back straight. "You called for me, Father?"

Rober de Leon pushed the errant strands of white hair from the blue eyes that so closely matched her own. Were it not for her eyes, speculations about her parentage might have continued for Caitrina's entire life. She was a late gift, conceived when her father was near forty-five with his new, young bride. His first two wives had presented Rober with no children, and even Caitrina's mother had borne him no others.

"Come in, Caitrina. Do not keep Lord Schmeidt waiting." It was spoken kindly, not so much a rebuke as an indulgent greeting.

Caitrina opened her mouth to protest that she was not a child, and near forgot to shut it again.

Lord Schmeidt stood. He was a giant of a man, a full head or more taller than her father, and Rober de Leon towered over most men. His hair was a rich

brown that fell like silk strands to his collar. It shone like a deep polished amber.

He turned to her. Her intended was broad of shoulder, a man who could snap her in two if he were angered with her. Caitrina had never found muscular men intimidating before, but there was something more than Lord Schmeidt's size that added to the feeling of danger about him.

Caitrina moved her eyes from his chest, her eye level, to his face. His eyes held her, pinning her in his gaze. The color was unusual — molten silver mixed with gray pearl.

Her face heated. Caitrina pressed a hand to the stomach laced over her houppelande, the smooth material a comfort to her shaking hand. A disconcerting trembling settled deep inside her. It made the trembling in her hand feel like a placid pond in comparison.

Lord Schmeidt smiled. He was young, very young to hold a title the likes of the one he did. He couldn't be much older than her own nineteen years. Lord Schmeidt was a lovely man, and that smile made her heart race.

"Caitrina?" her father asked, his voice laced in concern.

Lord Schmeidt crossed the room to her, his footsteps silent on the stone floor. He took her hand and kissed it gently. "Caitrina is well, Rober."

No. I am not, her mind protested. His voice was like silk brushed over her skin, sending shivers down her spine. *I am most definitely not well.*

His smile widened. "You are well. Are you not,

Geliebt?"

Her heart stuttered. Caitrina pulled her hand from his embrace, a nameless panic scattering her thoughts. She shook her head and turned, running blindly from the room.

Caitrina came to a halt deep in the garden. She gulped the chill air into her aching lungs. Her entire body shook, and she found herself wishing that she could return to her carefree youth and climb a tree to escape whatever came for her.

What was wrong with her? Caitrina couldn't sort her thoughts or emotions. She didn't fear Lord Schmeidt precisely, though he unnerved her. What caused her panic? What was this feeling when she looked at him, and who was Lord Schmeidt to affect her this way?

"Jörg." His voice came from close behind her.

Caitrina whirled around to face him, the deep blue brocade of her dress snagging on the thorny vines beside her. Any other time, that might have upset her but not when he was so close to her. Lord Schmeidt steadied her, his hands on her shoulders.

His eyes narrowed as she shivered. He stripped off his cloak and pulled it around her shoulders. "You will chill." His grasp of the language was surprisingly good and his accent almost non-existent.

She glanced around him, hoping her father was nearby.

Lord Schmeidt shook his head, chafing his palms up and down Caitrina's arms to warm her. "Rober left it to me to calm you, Caitrina. It is nothing more than nerves, to be expected considering the

circumstances.”

“No.” Her teeth chattered but not in the cold. “It is not. I am not a swooning female, Lord —”

“Jörg,” he insisted. “My name is Jörg.”

Caitrina took a calming breath. “Jörg.”

He smiled. She backed away, suddenly wary. It wasn’t natural, this feeling that assaulted her when he smiled. Caitrina looked at her body in dismay. It was a riot of sensation. Her womb ached. A dampness made her core sensitive to the brush of her underdress against her body.

Her nipples beaded against the bodice of her gown. Lord Schmeidt watched the faint outline of those nipples avidly. Caitrina gasped, draping her arm over them.

He removed her arm slowly. “It is a natural reaction, Caitrina.” His voice was rough. “It is a good sign that my proximity excites you.”

She shook her head. “No. It is not. I have never —”

His hands closed on her waist. His eyes darkened as she tried to back away again. The wall was at her back, blocking her escape. “It is natural,” he insisted. “You know.” He lowered his face toward her. “You know I am the one you have waited for.”

Good Lord! He means to kiss me. I don’t even know him. Caitrina threw her head aside, grimacing as a thorn scratched her throat. He stilled and met her eyes. Caitrina shivered, longing for the kiss she denied him even as she argued the madness in wanting such a thing.

Lord Schmeidt laid his lips over the scrape, and Caitrina swallowed a moan of pure delight. This

wasn't right. She wanted—Oh, she wanted Lord Schmeidt to make her entire body feel as good as that spot on her throat.

"Jörg," he reminded her, pressing another kiss to her skin.

Caitrina nodded, drinking in his scent. He smelled of rich earth and pungent spice — and something heady, a scent that was undeniably male.

His lips touched hers. Caitrina expected the copper of her own blood, but when he breached her lips; her senses swam in the taste of cinnamon and clove, warmed wine and candied fruit. Jörg's tongue caressed hers, and his groan vibrated down her body to that ache at the juncture of her thighs.

"Jörg," she pleaded. Caitrina touched his chest, tracing the contours of him through the fitted cyclas in the Italian style.

He tensed. "You do know. Don't you, Caitrina?"

She nodded. What did she know? That her marriage bed wouldn't be a chore with Jörg? Was she mad? If her father had seen that kiss—in plain sight in the garden with a man she had just met? She was surely mad.

Jörg pulled her to his body, his mouth seeking hers. "No. If anyone is mad, I am—for you."

Caitrina looked at him in shock. Jörg knew her mind as if he resided there. The thought was banished as her body exploded in sensation. Her eyes fluttered shut. Dizziness assaulted her, a sense that she was moving, though she had no sense of direction or speed. Her skirts rustled, though she felt no wind.

Jörg's hand cupped her breast, and she laid her

head back, stunned at the feeling of grass beneath her cheek. Caitrina stared at the twinkling stars in confusion.

"Jörg?" she asked weakly. "What is happening to me?"

"You feel it," he whispered. "You remember." Jörg pulled the cloak back and moved his eyes over her body breathlessly.

Caitrina shifted, the touch of his eyes like a physical caress. She bit back a cry of pleasure at the sensation of phantom fingers skating down her stomach, disappearing, then inching up between her thighs. Caitrina spread for him, shamelessly offering herself.

A rational kernel of her mind rebelled. She was laid out for his pleasure in a garden, swallowing cries that would bring her father to witness her wanton display. Her head spun. Where in the garden was she? The bushes beside her were nothing Caitrina remembered seeing. The gardens were quite large. It must be a corner she didn't typically see at night.

Caitrina gripped Jörg's arm, shuddering as his fingers breached her body. Her skirts were hiked up to her hips, folded gently under her body so that her buttocks rested on the wool of his cloak. A moment of unease stole over her. When had that happened?

Do you truly care? No. She didn't. Caitrina moved against his hand, crying out, then tensing in the realization of what she'd done. Panic welled in her.

"Gently," Jörg soothed her. "No one will hear you."

"But —"

Jörg's mouth was on hers, and his fingers massaged the sensitive flesh between her legs. He shifted his body over hers, his kiss more ardent. His fingers left her, and Caitrina growled a protest against his questing tongue. She no longer cared where she was. Her core was tender, needing, and Caitrina would have what she needed from him.

Jörg pushed back slowly. "You are pure," he commented. "Virginal."

If that reminder was meant for her, Caitrina couldn't find a care about the situation. Her urge to be his was too strong. It was more likely that the reminder was for himself, but he was her intended. She belonged to him.

"I can make it painless," he offered, "but I would prefer you to accept me without tricks. I don't have the restraint to make it painless without—"

She shied. "Pain?" Yes. There was pain in losing a maidenhead, burning, tearing pain. Jacquine had told her that. Caitrina shook her head. She didn't want pain, not when she was already so tender there.

Jörg nodded grimly. "No pain. You have my vow."

Caitrina bit her lip in confusion. "There is a way without pain?"

He nodded, smiling a predatory smile that made her ache for him increase.

"Why would a man hurt a woman if it is not necessary?"

Jörg sank over her, laying his lips on her throat again. "Not all men are as gifted as I," he teased.

Caitrina started to protest that sexual prowess in a man so young was nothing to pride oneself in. She

gasped in shock as Jörg licked at the column of her neck, nudging her chin up and aside to love at her more fully.

His mouth did delicious things to her body and mind. His lips brushed over her flesh, soft and smooth, warm and welcome. Those lips parted, and Jörg tasted her with the sinful tongue hidden behind them. He sucked lightly at her, and Caitrina bowed up to him, seeking what he offered. His teeth nipped at her, scraping her skin.

“Please, Jörg,” she whispered. “I’ll die.”

His hands held her head gently and his body pressed down into hers. The hard ridge of his cock teased at her thigh.

Caitrina’s breath caught in her lungs as a sharp pain assaulted her. Her scream dissolved into a moan. What was Jorg doing to her? The feeling of his suckling echoed through her breasts and the depths of her sheath. It wasn’t painful. Caitrina was sure that it had never been truly painful. The intensity of the sensation had merely surprised her. She wrapped her hands in his hair, drawing his mouth closer, reveling in the feeling of that insistent suckling.

Jorg eased his hips away, lifting her thighs open around him and pulling her ankles to the back of his hips. “*Hold me to you, Caitrina.*” His hand brushed her thigh as he worked at his clothing. He gripped her hips, and his tongue skated over her throat as he straightened and settled the head of his cock at her entrance.

Caitrina pulled at his shoulders, desperate now to feel the fullness that cock buried deep inside her. He

thrust deep, his eyes closing and his muscles tensing beneath her fingers. Caitrina licked her lip, watching the ecstasy etched on Jörg's face hungrily.

"Now," he rasped. His body retreated then lodged deeper still.

Caitrina cried out, her sheath gripping him, desperate to hold him forever. Jörg's eyes glowed like fine jewelry in firelight as he thrust again and again into the tightness she afforded him. Her body tensed, her legs pulling him deeper. She felt it coming for her, a rush of blood in her ears that made her body hot and hungry.

"Jörg," she whispered. Caitrina had no name for what stalked her, what waited just out of reach. She feared it even as she knew she had to experience it to be whole.

Jörg nodded in encouragement. "Let it take you," he urged her.

It did. Her sheath spasmed around him, and Jörg cried out harshly in response. Waves of warmth rode her veins, coursing through her body, making her feel weak and sensitized. Every brush of his body became a welcome agony of intense pleasure.

Jörg roared, wash after wash of his seed filling her. It felt wonderful. It felt right. Caitrina met his eyes, her body still on fire for him.

He nodded. "*Sleep, love. Tomorrow, our journey begins.*"

Caitrina furrowed her brow, her eyes heavy in exhaustion and confusion. Had Jörg spoken to her without moving his lips?

"'Tis all a dream, Geliebt. Sleep. You will remember

none of this – for now.”

She tried to protest that such a thing was impossible. With his cock still buried deep inside her, how could Jörg say something so ridiculous? She wouldn't remember this – the most startling experience of her young life? Was he mad? Her mouth moved to tell him, but Caitrina couldn't seem to form the words. Her eyes slid shut, her hands sliding from his body. Warmth enfolded her.

Jörg left her body. Caitrina wanted to beg him to stay, but she was too comfortable to be vexed by anything for long.

Sleep took her, a deep sleep full of impossible dreams. What was Jörg doing to her? His tongue bathed her inner thighs and her core, tickling the depths of her until the burn bit into the haze in her mind. Caitrina screamed his name as bliss took her again. Then she felt nothing.

Chapter Two

Caitrina opened her eyes, regarding Jacquine's concerned look in confusion.

"You are well, mi'lady?" she asked nervously.

Frustration welled in Caitrina. Why would any sane person be concerned that she was well? "Of course," she snapped, trying to ignore the nagging ache in her skull. "Why would I not be?"

Jacquine's eyes widened. "Do you have no memory of your collapse in the garden, mi'lady?"

Caitrina rubbed her forehead, trying to disperse the fog gathered in her mind. "I went to the garden." She recalled that much, nodding. Jörg unnerved her. She wouldn't admit that to Jacquine or to anyone else. "Jörg—" She felt her face heat at using so familiar an address for her intended. "Lord Schmeidt came to speak to me, and gave me his cloak."

She remembered that he tried to kiss her — or did he kiss her? The half-memory of a mouth sweet in spice taunted her.

"Yes?" Jacquine prodded her.

She backed from him then. Caitrina ran her fingers over her throat, finding the small scab. "A thorn. A thorn pierced me, and — Oh, dear Lord." *His mouth*

was on my throat. Thank the merciful savior Father hadn't seen that.

"Mi'lady?"

"Lord Schmeidt— His mouth was on my throat?" Hazy remembrances of heat in her blood and his mouth and hands on her body assaulted her. Caitrina denied that she enjoyed those things even as her nipples tightened against the thin shift and heavy quilt. Her womb ached. The feelings were maddening, exciting—familiar. Had she done this when he touched her?

Jacquine smiled in relief and brushed Caitrina's hair away from her throat. "Good. You remember."

Caitrina felt her face darken. "It is hardly something to be proud of," she grumbled. "A thorn—"

"A sting. You were stung. 'Twas not a thorn."

"What?" Caitrina rubbed at her head, trying to cut through the damnable fog obscuring her memory. "It was a thorn," she insisted.

Jacquine shook her head sadly. "No. A sting. We near lost you like your poor mother. Were it not for your young—"

"I've been stung in the past. Surely, you remember my father's panic. I have no such frailty."

"The surgeon says one may be stung many times and suddenly respond ill to it—or fall ill from a bee when a wasp offended not."

Caitrina placed her hand on the scab, rubbing it absently. Was it truly a poison? If it was an insect, why did she remember a thorn so clearly? Had she thought it was a thorn and been wrong? That hardly

seemed possible. Her mind had always been clear on such things. But, had her mind ever been clear in the company of Lord Schmeidt?

"Lord Schmeidt saved you. When he gleaned your distress, he removed the sting and sucked out much of the poison. It had not assaulted you full when he acted for you. When he carried you in—Oh, mi'lady. You were so pale and your heart so slow, your skin cool; your father near went mad in worry. He waits to see you still. Shall I send for him?"

"Please, Jacquine. I do not want to worry him."

Her maid left with a nod.

Caitrina pressed a hand to the pulsing in her womb. *It is just the poison from the sting*, she assured herself. It could be nothing more. If Lord Schmeidt had taken advantage in some way, Jacquine would have seen some sign of it when she undressed Caitrina. The rest was simply her own imaginings.

* * *

Jörg smiled, swallowing an outright laugh at Caitrina's attempts to explain away her arousal. He shifted against the windowpane, dressed again in the image of leather leggings and a training-style tunic. Jörg was always most comfortable in the clothing he wore in his earliest days, when he was a cursed warrior and not a damned beast.

The image was perfect, right down to the feeling of the fabric against his skin, recreated from those long-lost days of freedom. They were so much more comfortable than the real clothes he wore to greet his

mate, though in retrospect, Jörg was glad he wore those clothes. The image of clothing would not have kept Caitrina warm when she ran from him. Even making her body disregard the cold would not have protected her from it, and the power outlay would have drawn warriors to him.

Caitrina looked to the window curiously, looking through Jörg's ghosted form and into the dark night behind him. He hardened as he visited her thoughts. She remembered. Caitrina remembered much more than Jörg anticipated, much more than her soul ever had in past lives.

She not only remembered her arousal, her body's response to his touch in the garden. Caitrina remembered her soul's past. She felt the ties that bound them one to the other. Caitrina remembered his touch from past lives, fleeting sensations of rightness that her conscious mind didn't actively pursue. None of the others had felt it as strongly.

Jörg took it as a sign, something he thought he would never be able to do again. He would succeed this time. He'd lost Regana again and again, finding her only to lose her before a month was done. This time would be different.

This time Jörg found the foul human who threatened her before he approached his mate. He wouldn't be clumsy enough to lose her that way again—not after Marie. Jörg found the human beast and dispatched him in a manner appropriate to his crimes. Jörg's stomach clenched at the thought of Jacque de Cambion ever laying hands on Regana — Caitrina.

The man was unclean in body and mind. His tastes ran to brutal treatment, humiliation, even blood in his love play. He sobered at that. Jörg wasn't like that with Regana's soul. He tried to forget the rush of pleasure her blood gave him. After Regana, feeling pleasure from taking her blood should sicken him. It did sicken him, when Jörg wasn't lost in the ecstasy of feeding.

Jacque—It was better to think about Jacque. One of the other elders would think Jacque the perfect candidate to be culled as a turned, encouraging the human to indulge in his tastes as a human minion in service before setting him loose on society as a turned. Jacque would be mad in disease soon, perfect material for his damned brethren to use.

Jörg set out to save Caitrina from Jacque, but on closer inspection, it would be better to kill the human beast. As a turned, he would be too much of a threat to Caitrina. When the sun set again and she was far from harm, Jörg would end Jacque de Cambion quickly and go to her.

Yes. He would go to her while she traveled and awake Caitrina's desires again. Jörg hadn't planned to claim Caitrina that night, but as he learned in his earliest days with Regana, he possessed little self-control when it came to his mate.

Jörg shivered, but not in the bitter cold of the night air. As a damned beast, things like weather, walls, and human eyes were inconsequential to him. He had ceased to worry about such things almost a thousand years earlier. He shivered in the reminders of why he needed to maintain his self-control this time. Jörg had

hurt Regana in countless, callous ways. He would not hurt her again in any of her lives.

Already, Caitrina was different. Her first time was without pain. Jörg even held off his pinnacle until she'd reached her ultimate pleasure. He had been tempted to enhance her pleasure, but Jörg hadn't wanted tricks between them.

Jörg sobered again. There had been tricks. He had taken her blood to free Caitrina the pain of taking her maidenhead. Her blood was sweet, the beauty and purity of her soul making it so. Jörg hadn't wanted to feed from her, but he was glad that her blood was so sweet.

Regana's blood had been bittersweet, tainted by her melancholy and the desperate request she made of him. Jörg shuddered. He owed Regana the release of her death, but he would never forgive himself for granting that request.

He turned his mind back to Caitrina. Jörg had taken only as much blood as he needed to make her first time pleasurable, and to grant her freedom from the duty of facing her father with the memory of their lovemaking in her mind. It was a temporary block. When the knowledge would not cause her guilt, Jörg would return a version of the truth to her — a version without his feeding involved.

Jörg hid the proof of their lovemaking carefully. He cleaned the blood and their mixed fluids from her inside and out, even using his cleansing power to aid in the task. Jörg had been forced to coerce the maid, Jacquine, a bit even then. He prayed that small outlay of power within the Leon household would not be

enough to bring the warriors down upon them.

He bit back a groan, stroking the stirring length of his cock as he remembered how Caitrina cried out to his ministrations in her half-aware state. Jörg would even thank the damned stone that made him a beast if she made the same joyous sound fully awake.

The itching started in the back of his neck, the niggling awareness that dawn was approaching. Jörg cast one last look at Caitrina, wrapped in her father's arms. Yes. Rober would protect her until Jörg's men came for her.

The old man had done a fine job raising Caitrina for Jörg, so much so that Jörg felt bad for using Rober's greatest fear against him to explain his daughter's slight pallor. Rober hadn't questioned Jörg's story, though Jörg could have easily handled it if he had, as easily as he handled the old man's qualms about letting Caitrina travel today.

Jörg dematerialized and floated away on a breeze. The human insect sniffing after Caitrina would soon be no more, but there were still grievous threats to her safety. There was a cursed warrior somewhere near. There was always a cursed warrior waiting to take Regana from him – and other beasts.

He lit on the ground behind the hapless warrior, solid again but ghosted better than this barely trained pup could comprehend. Jörg scowled. This wasn't the warrior he sought. This warrior was young, no more than two or three years past first night.

Jörg followed the boy as he picked his way down the hillside Jörg had taken Caitrina to. A low burn of annoyed *Blutjagd* burned in the pup's skin. He had

missed a kill, and he wasn't happy about it.

What should I do? Jörg could draw the other easily by killing the pup. The young one with the smell of Haus Kaufmann about him – *it must be Franz* – was here for one reason. He knew a beast had fed. The warrior hadn't locked onto Caitrina. Franz obviously had no idea what beast he sought. If he did, the warrior would have called in his lord to help him. No warrior faced the mad elder alone and lived to tell the tale.

Jörg dematerialized and streamed away to the hilltop where he loved Caitrina to take his rest. He sank into the ground, drinking in the imagined smell of their union around him. It was better to leave the warrior—for now. If Jörg faced more than one now, he might be injured and unable to rejoin Caitrina for several days while the earth healed him.

Chapter Three

Caitrina shivered, pulling her cloak close around her. She still didn't understand why they had to leave today, but her father and Lord Schmeidt had decided that it would be so.

Two small trunks had been loaded into the smaller carriage, and the rest of her belongings would follow later with other men. Ten of Lord Schmeidt's men would accompany Jacquine and herself. Two rode on each carriage, and six were mounted. All of the men were armed. Lord Schmeidt was nowhere in view. Martin, the captain of his guard, assured Caitrina that her lord had simply ridden ahead to see to some business while they made their way to his estate.

She slid her eyes over the Lord's carriage. It was a strange design, one Caitrina had not encountered before. The carriage was fully enclosed, complete with heavy drapes over the interior of the flaps to cut down on the cold evening wind, dust, sound and sunlight that could enter the interior when one did not wish it. It was monstrously huge with a wide, deep velvet seat and ample space to stretch out even the lord's long legs. It was a most comfortable way to travel, almost decadent. The color was reminiscent of

his eyes, a soft gray that was oddly pleasing to her senses.

Martin bowed to her smoothly, a fine figure of a gentleman, though he was a man of the Isles — most likely one of the conquered natives by his look. “G’day, mi’lady,” he intoned pleasantly.

She offered him a strained smile and put her gloved hand in his as Martin reached to help her into the carriage.

The attack came without warning, a black-clad man of about her own age appearing from nowhere to grasp Caitrina by the upper arm. He whipped the hood from her head and forced her chin up with a fist wrapped around the hilt of a dagger the length of her forearm. His eyes narrowed.

Caitrina shuddered, looking to Schmeidt’s guards in confusion. They made no move to help her, stilled by Martin’s upraised hand, though all of them grasped their weapons in warning.

Martin nodded his assurances to her. “Release her,” he ordered calmly.

The madman motioned to Caitrina. “Your master should have hidden his work better than this.”

Martin shook his head. “The lady was stung last night. There are witnesses.”

“There are always witnesses,” he sneered. His hand tightened on her arm. “What is Veriel’s interest in her, minion?”

Caitrina swallowed a cry of pain as his fingers bit into her arm. “W — who?” she stammered.

“The one who did that,” the young man exploded.

“A — an insect,” she whispered.

He made a sound of disgust. "He took your memory, of course. Answer me, minion."

Martin settled his hand on the hilt of his sword. "You may kill me and every man who serves me, warrior, but I know your code. The lady is an innocent in this battle."

The man ground his teeth, fixing a look of pure fury on Caitrina. "Ask for my protection," he growled.

She shook her head. "I don't want your protection." Caitrina didn't want anything from him.

"Release her, Franz," a new voice ordered. "She is an innocent. You know the laws."

Franz pushed her toward Martin, stalking to the older man with that same look of malice. The other was dressed much like the youth was, black boots and breeches, tunic and cloak. He had identical deep brown eyes and black curls.

He bowed his head. "Mi'lady," he greeted her.

Caitrina nodded shakily.

Without warning, he struck Franz across the face, knocking the young man to the ground. The older man reached his hand, stained in Franz's blood, toward Caitrina.

She shrank behind Martin, terrified by this barbaric display.

The man nodded grimly. "My nephew will not injure you again. If he does, I will present his corpse to you. You have my vow."

Caitrina flicked a shocked look at Franz. The young man bowed his head to her, looking much less threatening. She turned her eyes back to the older

man as he started speaking again, wiping his nephew's blood on a length of cloth — black like everything else about him.

"I am Etienne of Kaufmann, mi'lady. And you?"

"Do not answer him," Martin growled.

Etienne smiled, a disarming smile that made him appear little more than a boy though he was surely near thirty years of age. "As you will, mi'lady. Where do you travel?"

"Get in the carriage, mi'lady," Martin ordered, only slightly less gruffly.

Caitrina hesitated, confused by this exchange — and by her reactions. Franz frightened her, but Caitrina trusted Etienne in some strange manner she couldn't comprehend. He was a barbarian, yet at the same time, he was genteel and possessing of a strict code of honor that dictated he would slay a boy of his own family rather than let the impetuous pup hurt her. She furrowed her brow. *Pup? Now, why would I choose such a term for this dangerous young man?*

"Mi'lady," Martin reminded her.

She nodded and met Etienne's eyes. "I thank you for your assistance, sir." Caitrina turned into the carriage, using Martin's hand to steady herself.

"Caitrina?" her father called. "Is there a problem?"

She looked to where Etienne and Franz stood a moment before. They were gone, disappeared from view. Caitrina noted Martin's pained expression uneasily.

"Caitrina?" he called again.

"No, Father. I am well," she lied.

* * *

Jörg materialized by the side of the road. He'd passed his men and their precious cargo more than a league back. They would be upon him soon.

He closed his eyes, concentrating on his link with Caitrina, picking the strand from the hundreds of active feed links within him. Jörg had fed from all of his bought humans as a part of their pact. He could track Martin or any of the others, but he chose to track Caitrina, to experience the thrill of feeling her draw near.

Martin drew up beside him and motioned for the carriages to stop. He nodded to Jörg stiffly.

"There was a problem?" Jörg asked, keeping his distance from Martin's mount. Animals tolerated him only at a distance, and Jörg had no wish to upset the beast unnecessarily.

"Warriors — two of the animals. The young one handled your lady."

Jörg nodded, wishing for one mad moment that he had killed the pup where he stood the night before and ended this before they found their way to Caitrina.

Martin laughed a humorless laugh. "He tried to order your lady to take his protection. She refused him. His master struck him a single blow for his appalling lack of self-control."

"Caitrina?"

"Shaken and frightened." He scowled. "We outnumbered them ten to two."

His meaning was clear. Martin would have liked

nothing more than to end the warrior who touched Caitrina. Jörg sighed, recalling Martin's price.

Jörg had come upon Martin as he crouched over his slain family. Their bargain was a simple one. In exchange for Martin's service, Jörg would deliver the bandits to their hell personally and painfully. Jörg delivered his promise before the sun rose. Martin gave his blood willingly, and had served faithfully ever since. Of all his bought, Martin was his most loyal—and the only human Jörg considered a friend.

"And they would have slain twice your number easily. I have seen it," Jörg reminded him calmly. *I have done it, and much more.*

Martin nodded, chastised by the reminder. There was a reason Jörg told them not to fight the warriors if they came for Caitrina. Jörg could handle the warriors. He could handle the beasts. Martin's only job was to safeguard Caitrina from humans who might harm her. Anything else would likely cost Martin his life.

Jacquine opened the door to his carriage and stepped onto the runner. "Why have we stopped?" she demanded, sounding slightly annoyed.

Jörg approached her, giving the horses a wide berth. "Forgive me, Jacqueline. I grew tired of riding, and wished to join my lady." He made sure to add the illusion of trail dust to his clothing to complete the image of a long, hard ride before he reached a field of clear vision for her.

She nodded and turned back.

"Alone," he qualified.

Jacquine shot him a look of confusion and concern.

Her thoughts were a riot. The servant had no wish to anger her new lord, but it was unseemly to leave her lady alone with him before they were properly wed.

Jörg drew in his power, exerting his coercion over her. "Caitrina will be safe with me," he whispered.

She met his eyes, nodding slowly. "As you wish, my lord."

He smiled as she climbed into the second carriage, using Matthew's hand to balance herself. Jörg shot a warning look at the young bought, and Matthew scurried away to his mount, reminded silently of his place. Jörg would have to arrange for a bit of entertainment for the men when they reached a stop.

Despite his warning that Jacquine was not to be molested, that she was under Jörg's protection, she was a luscious bit of female flesh, and the men were starved for female company. Perhaps Jörg would take a bit of blood from the whore before he turned her over to pleasure his men. It never hurt to check for disease to keep his men healthy before they indulged.

He sighed. Perhaps he should take a bit of Matthew's blood as well. It was unlikely that his bought had decided to turn on him, but a bit of blood should tell the tale. Restless and unnerved, Jörg left the carriage, ordering Jacquine to sleep via coercion and motioning to Martin to keep Caitrina busy if she decided to investigate the long delay.

Matthew paled when Jörg motioned to him, but he dismounted and came to the back of the second carriage as Jörg asked. Matthew had never cared for giving his blood when it was called for, but Jörg kept to his end of the bargain, keeping the young man's

sister well-cared for in service to a kind lady who owed Jörg more than a few favors of her own.

"Be still, Matthew. You know our bargain," Jörg soothed him, exerting just a touch of calming coercion.

The young man extended his wrist for Jörg's use, sucking in his breath as the first pulse of pleasure washed over him. His eyes dilated as his arousal grew. Jörg promised pleasure for the taking of blood, but there was only one type of pleasure he could give.

Matthew's mind opened wide to Jörg as the blood sated his raging hunger. Jörg exercised strict control, taking only two swallows from the man and sending him over into an orgasm as he closed the feeding site. Matthew leaned heavily against Jörg's chest, gritting back the cry of release he wanted to vent. His heart thundered in his chest. He gasped, shivering as he gave in to his body's need to physically release.

Jörg's fangs extended further. It would be so easy to cross the line with his men as his brother elders had on so many occasions. The urge to sexually release with a willing partner while he fed was always hard to resist, but men were not to his tastes — or so he told himself, when one of his men climaxed in his arms and Jörg rose to the occasion. He hadn't crossed that line, not in the thousand years since Jörg became what he now was, and today was not the day he would start.

Matthew recovered slowly, not quite meeting Jörg's eyes. The fact that he couldn't stop himself from experiencing the natural reaction to Jörg's push of pleasure embarrassed him.

"You serve me faithfully," Jörg assured him. "When we stop tonight, the first woman is yours. You have my word."

Matthew managed a wolfish smile at that. He really had been too long without a woman. Jörg would have to be more mindful of that in the future. Even his most loyal would turn on him, if Jörg didn't see to their needs.

"Can you ride?" Jörg knew he could, but it couldn't hurt to show his concern for the man.

"Yes, master."

"Then do so." Jörg returned to the carriage, forcing his fangs down along with his errant cock. He used his cleansing power on himself to be fresh and untainted for Caitrina. No. He wouldn't cross the lines he set for himself. He wasn't fully a beast and never had been. Even if he was, Jörg had a much more willing partner, one he would much rather sate himself in.

Jörg smiled as he swung up into the carriage and motioned for Martin to start them moving again.

Chapter Four

Caitrina looked at him with wide eyes, searching for some sign of Jacquine behind him. Her heart hammered in her chest. Jörg felt the blood rushing in Caitrina's veins in a mixture of fear and arousal. He closed the door, leaving only the bright moonlight that sifted around the drapes around them.

Jörg fell to his knees before her, kissing Caitrina's hand as the carriage started out. "Calm, *Geliebt*," he whispered hoarsely. "Are you well?"

"No," she gasped.

He kissed her wrist, feeling her pulse jump at the touch. Her musk teased his nose. "What ails you, love?"

She hesitated. "Men— As we left, two men accosted us. Martin seemed to know them. Who are they?"

"An old enemy that would steal all I possess," Jörg explained. That described the warriors perfectly.

"Including me?"

Jörg nodded, kissing her racing pulse again. "If they knew you were mine," he confirmed. *They do know, but Kaufmann will not live long enough to take you from me.*

"You do not—" She faltered as he nipped at her

wrist.

"Do not?" he prodded.

"Possess me."

Her body called her a liar. Jörg hardened painfully as her core flooded with her delicious honey.

Jörg placed his hands on either side of her thighs on the seat. "Do you remember?" He brushed his lips over her jaw then her lips.

"Remember?" Caitrina asked in a voice thick in her arousal. She fisted her hands in her lap.

Jörg smiled as hazy half-remembrances filtered into her consciousness. He played his tongue along the seam of her lips slowly. "Open for me." He pressed his lips to hers, trusting that Caitrina's body would remember and respond.

She didn't disappoint him. Caitrina parted her lips dutifully, accepting his tongue. At the taste of him, she groaned, her memories unraveling at a maddening, leisurely pace. Their kiss was fevered, each of them taking away more than they poured in with every passing second.

"Jörg," she groaned.

He nodded. "Yes. Do you remember what we were doing when you were stung?"

Caitrina licked her lip, shaking her head, dazed. "You kissed me?" she guessed.

"Do you remember that?" he asked, knowing that she did.

"Yes," she admitted.

Jörg palmed the softness of her breast, meeting Caitrina's eyes as she gasped. She reached a hand to his chest slowly, seeking his approval as she explored

his body. Caitrina watched her hands, absorbed in her discoveries. Jörg pulled his tunic off for her, encouraging her to carry on.

After centuries without her touch, Jörg felt he might die if she didn't touch him. He sobered. If he could die any natural death, he would welcome it. Jörg pushed that thought away. While he had Regana in his arms, dark thoughts of his half-life and death were unwelcome.

Caitrina moved her eyes over him breathlessly. She touched the blood mark on his shoulder, the last vestige of his life as a cursed warrior. Caitrina leaned forward, kissing it as she always had. Jörg cradled her head as she loved at the mark.

"Regana," he crooned. "*Geliebt Mein.*"

"Reg," she whispered.

"Yes," he hissed. "Remember me." His blood mark was the sign of Reg, the intensity at the base of the fire. Regana had always been drawn to the mark.

Her hands feathered over his stomach and traced the head of his cock. Jörg blocked her thoughts, at the edges of control. If he watched the progression of images in her mind, he would ravish her — again, and Jörg promised himself he would never do that to another of Regana's souls.

"Do you remember what we were doing, Caitrina?" he rasped.

"Show me." Her mouth returned to the blood mark, her fingers playing at his rigid length. "Please, show me."

Jörg drew her skirts into her lap, stroking his fingers over her heated core, slick with her juices.

She shuddered. "You touched me inside." Caitrina's voice was a plea; for understanding, for clarity in the jumble of thoughts that assaulted her, for what she remembered.

He slid two fingers into her, smiling as her core clenched at them. "What else do you remember?"

Caitrina tipped her hips back and forth, rocking his fingers in and out. That wasn't something she had done the night before.

A vision of Ilona the night before she died forced its way into his mind. Yes. Ilona moved like that on his hand. Jörg captured her mouth, massaging his fingers in her as Ilona liked, twisting and thrusting.

She laid her head back, watching him with slumberous eyes. "I remember something else you did, Jörg."

"Which is?" He resisted looking into her mind, afraid that his control would snap.

Caitrina ran her fingers over his lips. "Your tongue. You put your tongue where your fingers are."

Jörg closed his eyes, letting her fever for his mouth wash over him. "Take off your dress," he requested. "Take off your dress, and I will do as you wish."

She paused only a moment then drew her clothing off slowly. He suckled at her nipples as they appeared, a need to taste all of her making him crazy.

"Please, Jörg."

He nodded, rolling his tongue around one peak. There would be time to indulge himself later. Caitrina wanted the sensations she remembered vividly, despite his coercion and mind games. This encounter was for her.

"I promised," he commented more to himself to her. Jörg pulled her knees over his shoulders, supporting Caitrina's weight as he sampled her juices.

She cried out softly, grasping at his hair. "Jörg," she gasped.

"Tell me when you remember more." Jörg prayed that moment would come soon.

He sucked at her nub until Caitrina cried out harshly. She bit her lip in the near darkness, holding in her pleasure.

"No," he chided her. "The horses are too loud for the men to hear. Do not hold back. Please." Jörg buried his tongue in her, groaning into her body as Caitrina cried out again.

I would even thank the stone...

Jörg pushed that thought away. The damned stone could wait for its thanks. He drove her body on ruthlessly, drinking in every quivering movement and whimper. Jörg was starved for it, starved for her.

The truth came to Caitrina in a moment of startling clarity that sent tongues of pleasure up Jörg's aching cock. He peeled his clothing back, preparing to claim her. She remembered the feeling of his complete mastery of her, of her body holding him in as she shattered in his arms, of his heat flooding her channel with seed that could never give her a child.

I will make that right. Whatever I have to do, I will.

Anything?

He pushed the thought away, aware that there were some things he would not do, even to assure Caitrina's happiness.

Caitrina didn't tell him. Her hands fisted in his

hair, and she urged him closer. Jörg obliged her whim; heartened that Caitrina wanted him so desperately in any form, that she was comfortable enough to demand a specific pleasure from him.

Jörg pushed her on, drunk on her taste and driven to the brink of a brutal possession by her breathless cries. Her thighs tightened reflexively as she bowed her back and screamed out his name, a wash of her personal flavor flooding his mouth.

Caitrina's mind demanded what her body was incapable of forming the words to request — his cock buried deep inside her, filling her. Jörg sat back, drawing her body down his until the head of his cock breached her. Caitrina's eyes widened, and she squirmed in his grip, seeking more of him.

"Slowly," he growled. "You will still be tender."

Despite his healing touch as he bathed her blood and their fluids from Caitrina, his invasion was new and physically traumatic. Jörg hadn't been as gentle as he should have been with her. His feeding could make her not feel the pain, but it could not stop the harm inherent in his fervor.

Jörg lowered her around him, inch by agonizing inch, allowing Caitrina's body time to adjust to his length and girth. She was so tight and warm; it was both a torture and a delight.

In the long centuries between Regana's incarnations, Jörg took many women. His body craved release. If Regana was not embodied for him, Jörg took release where he could, much as a cursed warrior would when he was widowed.

He thrust deep inside her, drinking in Caitrina's

scream of pleasure. She was embodied now. Jörg was buried deep in the one woman who gave him peace. He wouldn't think about her leaving him. Not now. Not while her sheath gripped him tight.

Jörg moved restlessly, needing that peace again. Caitrina met his eyes, pushing down on his length. His control fled. Jörg gripped her waist, pushing back the madness as he captured her mouth. Caitrina wanted him. She was willing, coming to him as Jörg tried to convince himself that Regana had in the beginning.

He threw his head back, drinking in the stillness in his soul as he poured wave after wave of his semen into her. Caitrina's fingernails bit into his shoulders, her body rippling around him.

"Yes," he breathed.

Caitrina sank to his chest, shivering in the aftereffects of her pleasure. Jörg groaned as her lips traced the blood mark. Flashes of Regana on their last night together raced through his mind.

"I love you," he said, cringing that he hadn't said it the first time he took Caitrina, that he hadn't said it that last night with Regana. Jörg couldn't be that bastard this time. He couldn't let Caitrina ever doubt what he felt for her. "I love you," he repeated, stroking a curl between his fingertips. "I will tell you a hundred times a day. I will prove it in a thousand ways. I have always loved you."

"*Stay with me,*" she replied in the ancient language he spoke with Regana, her voice thick in sleep. Caitrina had no idea what she was saying. Her dreams were talking, dreams of her life after he left

her behind. *"Do not ever leave me. I couldn't stand it."*

Jörg swallowed a sob. She remembered those dark days after he left. *"I will not leave you." Never again. I will never leave you without my love and protection again.*

* * *

Caitrina woke, smiling at the tender aches of loving a man. She opened her eyes, taking in the strange room in confusion. Where was she?

"Ah, awake at last," Jacqueline said brightly.

"Where are we?" And, where is Jörg? He promised not to leave me. Caitrina sobered. She was being ridiculous. What would it look like if he shared her bed?

"A small inn. We reached it late in the night. Lord Schmeidt didn't want to disturb your sleep. He was very courteous. He carried you to this room and barely left your side to see to his men's comfort before returning to you." She blushed, her dark eyes glittering over a smile.

"What is it?" Caitrina asked, bracing herself for knowing comments about her intimate relationship with Jörg.

Jacquine dropped down on the edge of the bed, patting Caitrina's hand. *"He loves you so dearly. You should have seen him, sitting on your bedside. He talks to you, even when you are not awake to hear his words of affection."*

Caitrina felt her cheeks heat. What had Jörg said in the carriage? *A hundred times a day—a thousand different ways.*

"What things?" she whispered. "Oh please, Jacquine. You must tell me."

Her maid laughed heartily. "Lord Schmeidt talks of his love for you in terms of forever — forever before and forever more. 'Tis poetry to hear it." Jacquine sighed, pressing a hand to her heart.

Caitrina's heart fluttered at the thought. "I wish I could have heard it," she admitted wistfully.

"I am certain he will say it again."

"What else did he say?" she asked urgently.

Jacquine's face lit. "Promises, mi'lady. Lord Schmeidt made so many promises. He would do nearly anything for you."

Caitrina looked at her hand sadly. "I care little about such things, Jacquine. You know I do not. Jacque offered me as much."

She shook her head. "No, mi'lady. Not furs and jewels. He makes promises for your happiness."

"My happiness?" Caitrina asked uncertainly.

Jacquine nodded. "What would you have of him? He would do anything your heart desires if it would make you smile. What is your fondest wish? You have but to tell him, and it is yours."

Caitrina darkened, as her body made her desires known. *I must be depraved.* "I should like to eat and to see Jörg."

"We will dress you and join the men downstairs."

She nodded, her heart light at seeing Jörg again. Washed and dressed, Caitrina fairly ran to the common room. She nodded to Martin as he stood to greet her, standing on tiptoe to search for Jörg over the heads of the other men.

"You are well, mi'lady?" he asked.

"Yes, Martin. Very well. Where is my Lord Jörg?"

"Ridden on, mi'lady. He will meet us when we stop for the evening meal."

Her heart sank. "Why?" *He promised not to leave me. Are all his promises worth so little?*

"Your safety is most urgent to him. Lord Schmeidt chances nothing, even to me."

Caitrina nodded and took his arm, allowing Martin to lead her to a table. A girl set out a hearty meal for her before Caitrina could catch her breath to ask for what she brought. Caitrina ate a bit, reminding herself that it would be many long hours with little more than bread, cheese, and water in the carriage before they would stop for another meal.

She chided herself. Jörg promised not to leave her, but it was childish to expect him to coddle her. She couldn't expect that a man of his station would sit with her and hold her hand every moment of the day – to love her at every private moment.

Caitrina ran all the loving words Jörg said to her over and over in her mind. He talked about always loving her, loving her from forever past. *Do you remember?* Jörg asked her that in the garden. What was there for Caitrina to remember then?

A chill raced up her spine, and she turned, catching the barest flash of black at the edges of her vision. Then it was gone. Caitrina searched the room fearfully; sure that something had been close behind her moments before.

"Is there a problem, mi'lady?" Martin asked, setting down a warm tea for her.

“I thought—No, Martin. I am sure it was just my imagination.”

Martin did not seem so convinced.

Chapter Five

Jörg walked along in the deep shadows beneath the trees. The sun was not fully set, and it hurt to look at it directly, but he was no first-turned fool. Jörg could walk about on darkly overcast days or in deep shadow with only a niggling unease that he was doing so. Few of his kind could stand sunlight of any kind, but Jörg had never truly been like another of his kind – except Pauwel.

He shook away the memories of Regana's second husband. Of all the mistakes and horrid choices Jörg made over the years, turning Pauwel Lord Crossbearer had been one of his worst. Jörg's only salvation that night had been Pauwel's love for Regana. Pauwel had printed on her as Jörg had. The printing alone allowed them to retain one thing no other beast did – their kind emotions.

At moments, like the time Jörg spent in Caitrina's arms or at her bedside, he praised the depth of the love he was capable of. At others, he saw it for what it was, the gods' harshest torture for him.

Even as a cursed warrior, printing and madness walked arm in arm. A warrior who lost his mate too late in printing, who waited too long to claim his

mate, whose mate was endangered, or who found himself widowed was apt to go mad and have to be killed by his brothers to protect warriors and humans alike.

Jörg knew all the madness a warrior could feel in that regard intimately. While a cursed warrior knew he would never love again, and sought solace in that fact when he was widowed, Jörg was well and truly damned. He had no such assurances. So far, Regana's incarnations had lain dead in his arms five times. Five times, his printing sent him through the fires of his loss; the madness of losing yet knowing her soul would call for him again.

Her death was at Jörg's hands only in Regana's first incarnation. The next four had died because of his failure to protect them fully from humans, beasts, and warriors alike. Still, Jörg felt the guilt of their loss as if he had stopped their hearts himself. He loved them all—Regana, Marie, Andaswintha, Syrith, and Ilona. The loving was a form of madness. The losing was worse.

Her voice caught his attention, and Jörg moved toward Caitrina faster than any man or warrior could travel. The sun was nearly gone, the last red rays a halo around her. Jörg strode toward Caitrina, ignoring the itching and burning of his sensitive eyes, ignoring also the look of stunned disbelief Martin sent him for such folly. No one but Regana could entice Jörg to walk into even a weak sun.

Caitrina looked up at him, blushing prettily as she met his eyes. Jörg hardened at the unspoken invitation in the depths of her blue eyes, at the subtle

change of her scent on the breeze between them.

He sank to the cloth beside her, laying a kiss on her jaw below her ear. "Good evening, *Geliebt*. You are well?"

She lifted a sliver of meat to his mouth, and Jörg took it with a look that promised feasting of another sort. He savored the offered treat with only the slightest pang that it could not sustain him as completely as it once did. Jörg had taken blood that morning, a small amount from a whore two towns from where he left Caitrina and his men to supplement the mouthfuls he took from Matthew, and from the whores he gave his men. Jörg would not have to eat again for more than a day.

Caitrina laughed as he sucked at her fingers, taking the next bit of food from her hand. "I am well," she assured him.

He shook his head as she offered a bit of cheese. "You eat. You should keep up your strength."

She swallowed, turning slightly from Jacquine to hide the depth of her blush. "Will you join me in the carriage now?" she asked hopefully.

Jörg raised her hand to his lips and kissed Caitrina's knuckles gently, each in turn. "Would that please you, my love?"

"Yes," she admitted. "It would please me very much."

"Then no force beneath the stars could drag me from your side." *Beneath the stars*. Only the sun could drive him away from her, and so he could not make that promise to her.

Caitrina nodded, quiet though her mind was

crowded with disconcerted thoughts tumbling one over the other.

He stood. "Come, dear one. If you are finished dining, we will depart."

She nodded, allowing Jörg to draw her up with him. Caitrina motioned her servant to the second carriage, then moved on without waiting for a response.

Jörg closed the flaps and curtains Jacquine had opened for the day, turning to Caitrina. He sank beside her, needing to understand what upset her, yet not being able to unravel the twist of emotions holding her fast. Scattered images from this life and others assaulted her. Visions of warriors past and present worried her. He searched Caitrina's eyes and her mind. Had she seen a warrior this day? No. Just something that reminded her of them. Jörg relaxed slightly.

Caitrina didn't give him a chance to question her. She turned to him, searching out Jörg's mouth urgently, pulling at his surcote and tunic. Jörg groaned, his cock responding frantically to a heated encounter he had not seen the likes of since Regana's first incarnation. She was willing in a way that she hadn't been since before he left her.

No. Not willing. Caitrina is panicked. He eased back, meeting her eyes while the beast within him howled for completion. Jörg wasn't the heartless bastard who thought only of his own pleasure anymore. He touched her lips, shaking his head slowly.

"Tell me, Caitrina. What is troubling you?" he whispered.

Outside, Martin let out a piercing whistle. The carriage lurched forward, then started to rock gently.

"Please, tell me," he repeated.

Caitrina's eyes were full of pain and confusion. "How do I know you, Jörg? What is this trust? This—What are these memories you ask of me?"

Jörg took a calming breath and put his arms out to her in invitation. Caitrina hesitated then crawled onto his lap and into his arms.

"We have—We have known each other for many lifetimes," he began.

Caitrina gasped. "Blasphemy," she whispered.

"No. Search your heart. You know me. You have always known me, Caitrina."

She met his eyes, looking lost and confused. Caitrina brushed her lips over his again, teasing and nipping at him.

"Caitrina," he groaned. "I want you to understand."

"I understand this," she insisted quietly. "This doesn't confuse me."

Jörg fought back a wave of nausea. "Not this time," he decided. "You won't believe this is all there is between us this time."

"How do you remember—You do remember these past lives. Don't you?"

He nodded. Yes, Jörg remembered every detail, good and bad, in searing clarity. He couldn't drink it away, fuck it away, or die to find peace—not until his stone-ordained murderer took him in battle.

"Tell me," she begged. "Please tell me about us."

Gods alive! How could he even begin to tell her all there

was? “Your name in the first life we shared was Regana. We grew up together, only two seasons apart in age. Our lands sat aside one another. I was a warrior, and you were strong and bold as one. You asked to be a warrior, but women were not permitted to be warriors.”

Caitrina laid her head on his chest, playing her fingers in Jörg’s surcote. Her mind stopped its insistent rioting to take in the tale of her life.

“We were lovers, secretly because we were not permitted to wed.”

“Why?” Her voice was sad, as if she remembered the agony of waiting for the day they would be allowed to commit to each other openly.

“As a warrior, it was against our laws for me to wed until our enemy was vanquished. I was mad with wanting you.” *So mad that I was brutal in claiming you, and still you loved me.* “If we had been caught, I would have been executed by our laws for laying hands on you.”

“Did we ever marry?”

“No. Some of my brother warriors learned that I was your lover.” He paused, at a loss to continue into his greatest shame, his most damning crimes.

Caitrina pushed back, tears pooling in her eyes, pale, shaking her head in disbelief. “They killed you.” Her voice shook in anger. “They killed you because of me.”

“No. Never because of you,” he soothed her. “I pursued you. You agreed only because you knew I was nearly mad in needing you.”

She fisted her hand in his clothing. “They killed

you," she repeated.

"No. They did worse than that. They threatened to have you killed unless I stole something they wanted from our temple. They made me a traitor. I allowed it to save— Afterward, I was dead to our people." *And damned to this half-life.* "I had nothing to offer you. They would have killed you if you came to me. My home was destroyed and my lands taken. I was hunted — and hated." *I was feared. You feared me.*

"You left me." Caitrina didn't ask it. She remembered that much clearly. The pain and confusion of those days washed over her.

"Yes," he admitted. "I was a fool."

"And my other lifetimes?" she asked.

"I was clumsy. I would find you only to lose you, but I never left you again. Perhaps, I should have some of the times we met. I am dangerous to you."

"No," she gasped. "You cannot leave me."

Jörg smiled weakly. "I cannot. I cannot stomach the thought of it." *I am printed to you. I cannot stomach hurting you in any way. I would die if you asked me — if I could.*

Caitrina nodded and sank into his arms, exhausted.

"Sleep," he whispered, sending the command to her battered mind. Jörg sighed as she relaxed in his arms. He stroked the hair from her cheek.

I didn't lie. I told her the truth.

Not the whole truth. You know you didn't tell her everything.

I cannot. You know I cannot tell her everything.

You have always been a beast.

Yes. I have.

* * *

Jörg stood over her, his face a study in fury. She backed from him, terrified, running her hands over the baby she carried – her son. Andris. His name is Andris.

"You carry his child," Jörg spat, his hands fisted in fury.

Caitrina weaved in dizziness. Words passed between them that had no meaning, angry words in a strange language that she did yet did not understand, pleading, shouting.

The internal thoughts were easier to understand, more primal and urgent. I have to hide the truth. He cannot know. He will destroy me if he knows the truth. Why will he not leave? He must know Pauwel comes. I have asked him to go, but Jörg will not.

"If I hadn't chosen damnation, would you have been mine for the choosing?" he demanded.

"I don't – " Kethe. I cannot tell him the truth in front of Kethe, though I should tell him that small truth. She met his eyes, her heart aching for the choice she had to make. I cannot lie to Jörg about this.

You must. This beast is not the Jörg you loved. He is mad, and he will kill you.

He will kill me either way for this. "No," she whispered. "I would not."

Jörg's face went cold as stone, his once-beautiful eyes frightening in their intensity. He threw a piece of clothing at her, and she recoiled as if the thing were a poisonous viper.

"I understand," he commented without inflection. There

was no love in him, no tenderness. For some reason, that didn't surprise her.

You don't. Please, you don't understand. Why did I not tell him the truth?

Because, he would kill both you and Pauwel for it.

"I will leave your home, Lady KreuzStütze. There is nothing for me here. There never was. May you never live long enough to know what that is like."

He disappeared with dizzying speed. Caitrina sank to the stone floor, shaking and shedding bitter tears.

What have I done? It was only me he wanted. Now he will kill everything I love.

* * *

Caitrina stiffened in Jörg's arms, pushing him away, sobs wracking her body. He cradled her in his arms, whispering calming words as she burrowed her face in his chest. Caitrina calmed, her sobs tapering off to hitching breaths.

"What is it?" Jörg asked. He prayed he was wrong. There were too many memories that would destroy their budding relationship.

"I betrayed you. I lied to you, and made you think I didn't love you when I did."

"You didn't. I know you didn't." Jörg knew all of Regana's secrets from his fatal feeding. She had only done what he forced her to do, what she had to do to survive.

"I did," she insisted miserably. "I remember it."

Jörg took a calming breath. "Tell me what you remember."

"You were furious. You wanted to know that I once loved you, and I lied to you. I watched you hurt, but I did nothing to stop it. I was—I betrayed you. I was pregnant to another man."

He shook his head. "No. You do not remember everything. It was a scene out of context of your life."

"I took another man. I know I did."

Jörg nodded. "Lifetimes ago. That was your first lifetime."

A tear traced down her cheek. "I betrayed you."

"Never. I was dead to you, a traitor to our people. You married another man. You had no choice."

Her mind was muddled in confusion. She seemed to have problems forming the questions warring in her mind. "I was forced to marry? I didn't love the man?" she whispered hopefully.

Jörg grimaced. She knew she loved Pauwel. "In time, you grew to love him. Pauwel was a good man. He was kind and attentive, all the things I had not learned to be yet." He wiped away her tears, his heart aching. "Had I not left you, you would not have been forced to marry him."

"Why did I marry a man I did not love? Was it arranged by my father?"

"Your father and mother were both dead. Gawen—Your brother and Pauwel sought to save your life."

"Why? What had I done?"

He hesitated. The truth would be difficult for her to hear—even more difficult for him to admit.

"Please, Jörg," she begged.

"The child was not your husband's. It was mine. You would have been killed for—I was a traitor," he

reminded her.

"I lied to you. I didn't tell you. Did I?"

He shook his head. "I found out in time." *Not in time. I nearly killed Pauwel to learn the truth from him, in fury and arrogance, believing I was best for you despite all evidence to the contrary. I turned him to give you back the one who was better. Jörg couldn't bring himself to admit that much to her.*

Caitrina paled. "I was selfish. Wasn't I?"

"It was the only way to save our son," he assured her.

"Andris," she whispered. "His name was Andris."

"Yes. He was a beautiful child — and a strong man." *He was gone too soon, killed by one of my damned brethren at the tender age of thirty-three. Andris never knew me. I never held him tenderly, mad enough to attempt feeding from him the night he became a warrior lord to give him the truth of his parentage. Was I ever more than a beast?*

Caitrina raised her hands, tangling them in the hair at the back of his neck. "And you loved me still," she noted.

"I have always loved you, even when you feared me."

Her eyes widened. "Why did I fear you?"

His heart stuttered. Caitrina remembered that she feared him, but she viewed it with only a burning curiosity. Regana's souls had always had an amazing capacity to forgive.

"You saw what a beast I could be," he admitted quietly. "I have not always made choices that were good ones where you are concerned. I have hurt

you.”

Caitrina shook her head. “You are not that man in this life. You are not a beast,” she whispered. She drew Jörg’s mouth down to hers, opening herself to his kiss.

Jörg fisted his hands in the back of her gown, fighting the urge to tear it from her body. Caitrina met his advances, lost in a firestorm of their shared need. Her hands skimmed down his chest and dragged up at his tunic and surcote. She freed his cock from the confines of his breeches, stroking his length as she continued to meet his mouth.

She pried one of his hands from the back of her dress and urged it to her mound. Jörg tossed her skirts into her lap, shuddering as she moaned into his mouth. Her body was hot and wet, clenching tight on his probing fingers. Caitrina bowed up to him, forcing his hand deeper, her mouth leaving his.

“Now,” she gasped. “Please, Jörg.”

He growled, lifting her astride his lap facing away from him. Caitrina guided him into her core, crying out as his cock stretched her near-virgin sheath. Jörg stilled, reining in the urge to pound into her until he filled her with all his body had to give.

Caitrina shifted, planting her palms on his knees to lever her body up and down on his length. “Jörg, I want you. I want all of you.”

Jörg leaned forward, cupping his hands over her breasts. He thrust deep, drinking in her breathless pleading for more. His body burned, and his control melted away. Jörg thrust again and again, faster with every encouragement from Caitrina.

The hunger came on him hard and fast, his fangs lengthening as the beast demanded fulfillment. Jörg nuzzled her hair, taking the delicate lobe of her ear in his mouth and scraping his teeth over it. Caitrina tipped her head, granting him greater access to her, trusting him utterly with her body. If only she knew the restraint she asked of him.

"I want to remember," Caitrina whispered. "You've done—"

Jörg closed his eyes as hazy half-memories of his feeding on the hillside over her garden filtered into her mind. She remembered. How could she possibly remember these things?

"In the garden, what did you do, Jörg?" Her voice was dreamy, thick in arousal.

He moaned as her arousal at those half-memories of his feeding filled his mind. Jörg kissed her throat, the need to taste her almost overpowering his common sense. "Why must you hurt yourself? Many of those memories are horrible things," he reminded her. "Let me build us new memories worth remembering."

"I am not whole without them," she reasoned. "I want to know them. I don't want to be haunted by dreams that I don't understand."

Jörg nodded. She would be. Her past lives would crowd in on her no matter what he did to try and stem the flow.

He pulled her dress and underdress over her head and settled his mouth on the column of her neck, kissing at her skin, stroking her with his tongue. His teeth pierced her, and he wiped away her pain as she

barely acknowledged it.

Jörg tasted her, her sweet arousal making his head spin. He forced his mind to his purpose. He couldn't drink too deeply. Feeding not only depleted her, but it drew warriors to him. Jörg suckled weakly, taking only a trickle of her blood to keep the active link open.

He sent their earliest memories; their carefree days as children, some from his memory and some from hers. It was a montage of running and climbing trees, hunting and games, playing while the older warriors trained, sleeping together in the dirt to the sound of weapons ringing out.

Caitrina gasped at the memory of their blood oath. "We will wed no one but each other," she repeated sadly.

"You had no choice," he assured her.

"Show me the first time you loved me," she requested as he sped through images of Regana watching his training as a cursed warrior.

"No. Please do not ask this of me."

"Please," she whispered.

He sent her images of his mounting madness to put his barbaric possession in context. Jörg watched her, shivered at the sound of her voice, burned for her every waking moment, and dreamed of her every night.

Jörg groaned at the memory of their first kiss beneath their tree. That long ago Jörg pressed her hard into the ground, stealing her breath and stilling her struggle. He closed his eyes, unable to wash away the memory of pulling at her clothing, of muting her

cry of pain as her barrier tore to his first thrust. She should have turned him over to Gawen that day. It would have been better for Regana and for everyone else if she had. Why did she forgive him?

"I am sorry." Jörg wanted to say much more, but there were no words to wash away the depth of his guilt. He rocked in Caitrina gently, all too aware of the brutal thrusts of the memory-Jörg in Regana for his own comfort.

The end came quickly, explosively. The memory-Jörg climaxed, issuing his weak excuses of printing and mad protestations of love to the stunned woman beneath him. Caitrina rippled around him, screaming his name. Jörg found himself drawn over with her, his cock pulsing as he poured himself into her.

"I am a bastard," he berated himself. *"To find pleasure not once but twice in that."*

"You needed me," Caitrina whispered. *"This printing—You were going mad."*

"You could always forgive." Jörg cradled her to his chest. *"I can take away—"*

"No. Take nothing from me. Let there be no lies between us. Please, Jörg."

He closed the punctures, sick at the possibilities of leaving Caitrina with the memory of what he was.

How had you expected to hide it from her? With more feeding? With other forays re-writing her memories to suit you?

I do not know. I never considered how I would hide it.

Caitrina eased off of his lessening cock. Jörg let her go, his eyes cast down and his heart pounding. If she turned from him, he couldn't stand it. He'd let her go

once. He'd given her to Pauwel and walked away. Jörg wasn't capable of such restraint a second time.

She turned toward him slowly. Jörg steadied her in the swaying carriage, though he didn't meet her eyes. He cleaned her blood from his mouth with a thought, unwilling to let her see the evidence of what he was.

"You know what I am," he breathed, bracing himself for her damning words, for her anger and hurt at his deception.

Caitrina dropped to his lap again, her tiny hands on his shoulders. She tipped his chin up until their eyes met. "You said that before, and I turned from you?"

He nodded. Why didn't Caitrina turn from him? Any sane woman would. Even Regana was smart enough to run from him.

No. She tried to accept me. I pushed her away and made a show of what I was to drive her from my side and to the perceived safety of her brother.

One of the few smart things you ever did where she was concerned.

Jörg nodded again at the truth of the matter.

"This is what they did to you? How they damned you? You have not lived lifetimes as I have, have you? For you, this is the same lifetime as the one you shared with her."

"Yes. I am a traitor to everything I once defended, and I will not die in the normal sense of the word."

"You are not a traitor to me. Promise me you will show me everything, good and bad."

"Caitrina, you do not know what you ask of me."

"Everything," she insisted.

"I cannot."

"It is the only way."

"I stole everything from you. I killed you," he pleaded. "Do not ask me to show you that."

She paled. "I want to know. Show me."

Jörg touched her face, stroking the baby-smooth skin of her cheek. "I will show you, and I will take back from you whatever you wish me to take back."

"Now?"

"No. It is too soon. Even when I take little from you, the loss weakens you."

"How often can you open new memories to me?"

"If I take as lightly as I did tonight, I can return your memories in short sessions every five or six days."

"Then that is what we will do," she decided.

"As you wish, dear one."

Chapter Six

November 28th, 1497

Caitrina moved against his body, pulling Jörg's mouth tighter to her breast. Still, he taunted her, bathing the nipple in his mouth without piercing her skin.

She had requested that he use her breast today. It was her favorite means of experiencing the feeding. Jörg hadn't used her throat since the first time he gave her back memories. She hadn't cared as much for the use of her shoulder, so he had only used it to feed once. His favorite was using her inner thigh, pleasuring her to climax with his mouth then stroking her core with his insistent fingers while he took her blood and returned her life to her. Caitrina liked that form best when she lay over him, giving Jörg pleasure while he took her, but he said that the distraction of climaxing in her mouth while he fed was too much a danger to do on a regular basis.

"Jörg," she reminded him. "You have put this off for a week. It is time."

"Let me love you," he begged.

"It is no different this time," she soothed him.

Jörg slid up her body. "It is different."

"Because I will see my death?"

"At my hands," he growled.

Caitrina traced the tense line of his jaw. "I have had lifetimes to dull the pain. I have the gift of knowing your suffering, of knowing how many times over you have paid for every mistake." She reminded Jörg of that over and over, but it never seemed to dispel his soul-deep fear that she would turn from him.

"Caitrina, you must understand how hard this will be for me—and for you."

She kissed him, her eyes fluttering closed as his passion grew. Caitrina encouraged his ardor. Jörg's resistance to showing Caitrina her life always seemed to crumble when his passions were inflamed. Jörg managed to control his need to possess her without reason only until she made it clear that such a mating was what she wanted. When she did that, the man knew no reason or restraint. He was fevered need unleashed, tireless and intent on nothing short of complete servitude to her whims.

Caitrina stroked his length, hot and heavy in her hand. He jerked, hissing out his breath as he fought to rein in his desires. The tips of his fangs peeked from behind his upper lip, not fully extended but responding as they always did to her offer of allowing Jörg complete mastery of her body and blood.

"You want me," she whispered. "You want my mouth wrapped around your cock while you take my blood. Tell me."

Jörg's nostrils flared. His fangs extended minutely.

"Yes," he admitted. "You know I do." He captured her mouth, teasing her lips and tongue with the scrape of his teeth.

"Mi'lady," Jacquine gasped.

Caitrina's eyes flew open. Jörg stilled. His teeth retreated as he forced them back. Jörg offered her a sad smile. They had always been careful. He had always encouraged Jacquine to sleep when he came to Caitrina at her rooms at an inn.

She looked to him in confusion. Had Jörg simply been distracted and forgotten, or was this a plan to avoid the memories he was to grant her?

Jörg grimaced, a sure sign that he was guilty of trying to evade her. He nodded once. "I will be gentle," he whispered as he brushed his lips over hers.

Caitrina turned as he rose from the bed. Jacquine's face paled, and she moved from foot to foot. Her eyes shifted from Caitrina to Jörg's cock and back.

"Look at me, Jacquine," Jörg ordered quietly.

Her maid met his eyes and stilled, color flooding her cheeks.

Jörg stepped up to her, staring down into her face. "My order to keep her away is strong, but I can only reorder her memory of this in one way."

Caitrina stroked a nipple absently, her body heating at the prospect of watching Jörg feed. "Do what you must."

Jörg shuddered, pushing Jacquine's shift from her shoulder. Caitrina eased to one side, her breath hitching as his fangs extended. He lowered his head, finding the artery in Jacquine's shoulder. His cock

bobbed in sexual excitement as Jacquine laid her head back on the wall with a sigh.

Caitrina bit her lip, her body responding fiercely to the sight of Jörg feeding, to the knowledge that he found such arousal in the act. She slid her hand down her stomach, fingering in the well of her body slowly. Scattered images of sexual fantasies danced in her mind.

"Hurry, Jörg," she invited. The sooner he came to her and released the tension building in his body, the better.

He pulled back, leaving the wound open, her blood making a lazy track down Jacquine's shoulder. Jörg ran his tongue through it. "What do you want?" he asked in a rough voice.

Caitrina shook her head in confusion. Her hand stilled. "I don't understand."

"You like to watch," he mused. Jörg licked the blood welling up again, closing his eyes and groaning his enjoyment of the act.

She gasped as his meaning became clear, removing her hand from her body angrily. "No. Send her away."

Jörg nodded, closing the wounds. Caitrina crossed her arms over her breasts, abruptly jealous of his handling of her maid. He sent Jacquine out of the room and returned to the bed, staring at the ceiling with a furrowed brow as if he was truly lost.

"I would offer you almost anything you desire," Jörg assured her.

"I do not desire you to — to be intimate with another woman," she stated in exasperation. "How

could you think –”

He raised her fingers to his mouth, rasping his tongue over the drying slick of her juices. “What were you thinking, Caitrina?”

She blushed. Caitrina had considered touching him while Jörg took Jacqueline’s blood. She had toyed with the idea of going to her knees and taking his cock in her mouth while he did. She groaned at some of the thoughts she had about the three of them.

Jörg nodded. “You wanted her to watch me take you, maybe to –”

Caitrina placed a shaking hand over his mouth. She knew what mad thoughts wandered her mind those few moments.

He kissed her fingers and moved her hand away. “I could not be sure what you wanted,” he continued miserably. “I would do almost anything you wish.”

She felt her fury spike again. He shouldn’t want such things. It wasn’t right. Jörg was hers alone. “Would you have been so quick if it was another man I wanted?” she challenged. Unbidden, Etienne of Kaufmann’s face loomed in her mind.

Jörg rose up over her on the bed, his eyes glowing red in anger. “No,” he stated simply. “I would not.” His muscles were tense, though he made no move against her.

Caitrina pulled Jörg over her, seeking his mouth. “I want you. I don’t want another, and I don’t want you to take another.” She pulled at his buttocks, urging Jörg into her body.

He filled her in a single thrust, holding her hips to him. “Is this what you want?” Jörg breathed, his body

setting a rhythm that made her ache for him all the more.

"You know what I want."

"This is not safe. If I feed again so soon, warriors will converge on us."

"I must know."

"Then we must leave directly after," he decided.

"As you wish."

Jörg suckled at her breast. Caitrina squirmed beneath him, eager to feel his complete possession.

His teeth scraped over her skin. "You are sure you want this?" he asked.

"Yes. Show me."

His fangs sank deep, the burning dissolving into the intense pleasure that stole her breath. Jörg mouth worked at her breast, his tongue playing at her nipple while he took all he needed from her at once.

"Show me, Jörg."

"Your pleasure first. Give me this."

"Yes."

Jörg took her faster, his mouth insistent at her breast. When she shattered, he sent memories to her sex-muddled mind as his seed heated her aching body.

It came at her in a rush, the details he feared. Regana begged him to kill her, all but killed him to force him to the act. Jörg relented, killing her painlessly and with orgasmic pleasure, holding Regana until long after she was no more, though he was bleeding to death from the wounds she inflicted on him, then screaming out his loss as he was forced to ground by the beast within him.

As the blackness took the Jörg in her memories, it took her as well. *"Do not leave me,"* she begged. *"I couldn't bear to lose you."*

"Never."

* * *

Jörg carried the bundle of his bride to the carriage, nodding to Martin. To his surprise, the human followed him in.

"There is a problem?" Jörg asked, settling Caitrina on the seat.

"Warriors. We have seen them skulking about. They seem to be waiting for something."

Jörg nodded. "They wait for Etienne Lord Kaufmann. They do not dare attack without him."

"You invite this confrontation?"

He hesitated, looking at Caitrina miserably. No. He did not invite this confrontation. Jörg would never willingly put Caitrina in the hands of the one who would be Pauwel.

"Jörg?"

"Of course not," he snapped. "But, it will come. No matter how I avoid it, it will come for us."

"Why do you invite it now? Why, when we cannot possibly defend our position?"

I have no choice. If Caitrina needs this to accept our life together, I will give it.

You could refuse her until you reach safety.

No. I cannot refuse her. I never could. Such is my madness.

"We move," Jörg ordered. He turned his face to the

rain blowing in. "It will be more difficult for them to follow in this. Arrange for food. We stop for nothing but the ladies' comfort for at least two days."

"Feeding?" Martin asked solemnly.

Jörg shook his head. "I fed deeply tonight. I will not require it for several days."

"If you do—" Martin let the offer hang between them. Of all Jörg's bought humans, Martin would offer the last drop of his blood and beat of his heart to sustain Jörg if it came to that.

"Not from you," he promised. "Not from anywhere within twenty leagues of our course."

Martin nodded grimly. "I will guard her when the time comes."

"Only if my life depends on it. Otherwise, it is my battle. You know that."

He nodded. "I will live my vow, Jörg. You have certainly lived yours."

"I know you will, my brother. I know you will." *Though it will mean your death.*

Chapter Seven

December 1st, 1497

Caitrina nestled her cheek to Jörg's chest, drinking in the scent of him. She looked around in confusion at the sunlight peeking at the edges of the heavy drapes over the window flaps.

She shook him frantically. "Jörg! You must wake up. You must go to ground. It is day."

"I will not leave you," he grumbled, unwilling to leave the depths of his day-sleep.

"It is not overcast. The rain has gone, and the day is bright." Even on cloudy days, Jörg burrowed his exposed skin under a cloak or quilt when she opened the carriage door to take comfort.

"Your protection," he yawned.

"You can do nothing about that. I have heard you speaking to Martin. You need the healing soil, but you have forsaken it for me. Please, take your proper rest—for me."

"Caitrina," he growled in warning. Jörg was always out of sorts when his day-sleep was disturbed.

"You haven't had healing sleep in three days," she argued. He'd only left her the night before to feed

when Martin pointed out his weakness to Jörg. "The warriors are near, and you must be rested when they come for us."

Jörg's eyes opened wide as the carriage lurched to a halt. "Oh, no. They waited for the sun."

"Hold them," Martin thundered. The sounds of men shouting and blade on blade fighting snuck through the thick drapes.

Caitrina shook her head in disbelief. "You must go." But, how could he go when the sun was so bright? "You can fight them, but you cannot fight the sun."

He nodded miserably, listening to the clang of sword on sword. Jörg pulled her underdress over her head and drew his cloak around her shoulders as she poked her arms through the fitted sleeves. He laid a fierce kiss on her lips.

"Do not accept anything but sustenance from them," Jörg instructed. "Remember their laws. They may not injure you, molest you—Tell them, and they will keep their distance."

"And if they do not?" she asked nervously. Caitrina had no doubts that young Franz would not hesitate to break the laws of his people.

His eyes flashed an angry red. "The suffering I rain down on them will know no equal." Jörg stroked her cheek. "I do not leave you. You know I will come for you."

Caitrina nodded. "Go before it is too late."

She turned in dismay as the door swung wide, squinting against the glare. *Too late.* Caitrina braced herself for a scream of pain from Jörg, for his agony as

the sun seared him.

The scream came, but it was one of fury from the figure silhouetted in the doorway.

Caitrina turned, laughing nervously. Jörg had gone, disappeared as the warriors outside her home had done. She sent her thanks to God, then sobered. Would her God approve of Jörg? Perhaps so. Jörg was more honorable than many Christian men she'd met were, and God loved all his creations, even the ones who lived off the meat of others.

She screamed in fright as the man grasped her arm and dragged Caitrina from the carriage. She stumbled into Jacqueline's arms, gasping at the destruction around them. All their guards lay dead. Caitrina sobbed at the loss. Martin and Matthew—all of them had been good, decent men. Jörg didn't take men who were not morally sound into his employ. Now they were all gone, slaughtered by these misguided fools.

"Gone," the man holding her arm barked. "The damned beast escaped somehow."

Caitrina straightened her spine and glared at Franz. "I will thank you to take your filthy hands off of me, warrior. You do have laws," she reminded him coldly.

The boy recoiled as if she burned him. He wiped his hand on his black tunic, a look of disgust on his face. She met his eyes steadily; refusing to show the slightest discomfort though the near-frozen, wet ground made her feet burn in protest.

She gasped in surprise as Franz was nudged aside. Etienne took his place, his large body—almost as large as Jörg's—filling her field of vision. The lord's

eyes were darkened with some emotion she couldn't name. Caitrina backed into Jacqueline's arms.

Etienne nodded, tipping her chin up. "No more than twice," he mused.

Caitrina wrapped her arms over her chest as the big man ripped Jörg's cloak from her body and tossed it away. She shivered, her nipples making points against her arms, but not in arousal. She dodged his hands as he reached for her again, but Etienne was faster.

He dragged her underdress off of her left shoulder, then her right. Etienne touched the spot where Jörg took blood from her shoulder, finding the faint marks flawlessly. His eyes narrowed. He moved his gaze over her body, settling on her crossed arms. Etienne met her eyes, his jaw tight in fury.

Caitrina shook her head in understanding. "No," she pleaded. "Your laws—" She shivered in a cold wind, her breath coming in tiny cloud puffs between them, rushing from between half-numb lips that trembled in fear.

Etienne pulled the cloak from his shoulders and wrapped it around her.

"No," she protested, trying to push it off. *Nothing but sustenance.* Jörg said to accept nothing more from them.

He grasped her wrists in one of his hands, yanking the cloak closed over her body again. "You'll freeze," Etienne growled at her.

Caitrina glanced at Jörg's cloak, but it was half-sunk in a deep puddle of mud. She nodded, holding back tears. She had to stay alive until Jörg came for

her.

Etienne swung her over his broad shoulder, mounting his horse and settling Caitrina in his lap. "Bring the maid," he ordered Franz. He didn't wait for his nephew's answer before urging his horse on, cradling Caitrina into the shelter of his body.

* * *

Etienne Lord Kaufmann watched as Caitrina sipped the warmed wine that he offered her. He couldn't seem to stop watching her. It was the most disconcerting thing he'd ever encountered. Etienne wanted her in a way he'd never wanted a woman, a deep, primal urge to have her. Never had anything caused his mind to wander from his duty as she did, and he had no idea why that would be.

Dealing with Caitrina was difficult in the extreme. She refused the amulet violently, leaving Etienne the choice of releasing her or allowing the blood tie to lead Veriel in. The mad elder would come for her. There was no question about that. The beast was fixated in a way that beasts did not fixate. Etienne needed to know why Veriel did. If he took on the mad elder, Etienne would need any knowledge of weaknesses he could get.

She confused him. Caitrina de Leon held herself straight and proud. Though Etienne had seen the proof of the beast's foul use of her, she was unbroken of spirit, suffering not from prolonged humiliation as one might assume she would.

Veriel had doubtless taken her blood many times,

but not enough to sustain himself. Caitrina was not blood weak from his use. She was barely pale despite his feeding. So, why did he continue to do it?

The beast had used her sexually. Caitrina all but admitted it, though she would not permit Etienne to examine her for damage. He fisted his hand in fury. He should have taken her that first morning when Caitrina was still confused, before she was enthralled by Veriel.

Etienne calmed himself. Veriel had used her sexually again and again, but Caitrina showed no sign of abuse or distress despite that use. It was not in a beast's nature to take release kindly. What was Veriel's game?

He glanced out the windowpanes. The sun would set soon. Etienne was running out of time to get the answers he needed.

Caitrina shrank from him as he strode to her. Etienne nodded to Franz, and the pup led the maid away. When they were gone, he turned to Caitrina.

"I only wish to protect you," he soothed her.

"And you kill my guards to accomplish that? They were good men, honest men."

Men who sold their souls into the service of a damned beast. Etienne crossed his arms over his chest.

Her eyes were full of pain at the memory of the men who died. "What did they do to injure you, warrior?" she whispered.

"Etienne," he reminded her.

"I know who you are." Her eyes seemed guarded. What had the beast told her to make her mistrust him so?

Etienne squatted before her. "Who am I?"

"The one who would poison me to kill him. You are too late, warrior. I know the truth this time."

"This time?"

She raised her chin in challenge.

"What truth?"

Caitrina met his eyes calmly. "You feel it. I know you do. You watch me. You will not win this time. I will not turn from him."

"Veriel —"

She stood, glaring at him. "Do not speak that foul name," she spat. "Your lies are wasted on me."

"What name should I use?" he asked curiously.

Caitrina threw her hands up in mute supplication to her God — or perhaps in frustration. "Would you use it?"

"Would it put you at ease if I did?" He didn't understand her upset. Etienne wished he did.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, it would."

"Then tell me the name."

"I have your vow?"

Etienne shifted nervously. He didn't want to give a vow for something he had no knowledge of, but he wanted to calm Caitrina more. "You have it."

"Jörg. His name is Jörg." She watched him for a reaction to that.

He rubbed a hand over the base of his skull. The beast was constrained from using that name. All the elders had been deemed unworthy of their human names. "He uses that name with you?"

"It is his name to use. The stone never forbade him to use it, and so he does."

This conversation was getting Etienne no closer to the answers he needed, and arguing the point with her would only upset Caitrina. "What does he want with you?"

Caitrina paced the floor, her arms crossed over her breasts.

"He doesn't want you for a food source. He could have women sexually by the dozens."

She looked at him, trying to hide the pain in her eyes and her blush with an angry countenance.

"It is sex," he mused. *That makes no sense. Veriel takes what he wants. He has always taken what he wants.*

Caitrina stopped her pacing, looking at him in horror. "It is not," she insisted.

"Not—"

"How dare you! How dare you judge—of course, I should have expected that, warrior." Caitrina started pacing again, seeming more agitated.

"Ver—"

She glared at him, her blue eyes flashing over fury-dark cheeks, challenging him to say the forbidden name or to break his vow to use it.

"He is a beast, a killer."

"I *know* what Jörg is. It is you who does not."

"You know?" What did she know? What was this conviction?

Caitrina stopped, sending him a raised eyebrow.

Etienne put his hands up in a calming gesture. Upsetting her unnecessarily would be foolish. "All right. You know what he is, and I do not. You have certainly spent more time in his company," he groused. *Dear gods, she is enthralled with him.* "What

does he want from you?"

"What does any man want?" she countered.

"You can't carry his children," he informed her gently. Only a *Blutjagdfrau* could do that. If that beast convinced Caitrina that she would have a house full of babies —

Caitrina's eyes filled with pain. She bit back a grimace. She knew. Caitrina knew there would be no babies. Etienne felt for her though her pain was misguided.

Her face hardened. "You believe that is the only worth a woman has?" she asked coldly.

"I never said that," he protested.

"You seem to feel that is what a man wants. Perhaps Jörg is simply a better man than you are. I should not have asked you to judge him by yourself."

Now, she was trying to provoke him. There could be no other reason for saying something so spiteful. Etienne took a calming breath and rose, crossing the room to her in three long strides. "Tell me what he wants with you."

"A wife. A companion. Love."

Etienne choked on his initial reply. "*Ver — It* has no kind emotions," he stormed. "Love means nothing to it. Marriage vows mean nothing. You —"

Caitrina slapped him, a jarring blow to his cheek. The resounding crack echoed off the walls. For a moment, they stared at each other, their breathing ragged.

"You mean nothing to him," Etienne continued gently. She had to hear that truth, even if Caitrina was too enthralled to believe him.

She drew her hand back to strike him again, and Etienne grasped her wrist gently but firmly. Caitrina tried to wrench her hand free, but he held his grip. Etienne stroked her wrist with the pad of his thumb, attempting to calm her while the connection was a gentle torture for him, scattering his intentions to the wind.

Caitrina watched his ministrations with wide eyes. She trembled, and her dark curls bounced as she shook her head. "No," she whispered. "Please."

Etienne released her, watching warily for another attack.

She rubbed her wrist with shaking fingers. "Your lies," she panted, "will get you killed. Give me a horse and set me free now, and I promise that Jörg will let you live. He will find me wherever you take me. You know he will."

Etienne nodded. Yes, the beast would find her, but he would take her back over Etienne's chilling corpse. "I am counting on it, mi'lady. Please, make yourself comfortable. Do not make me bind you."

Caitrina backed from him, sinking to the chair she fled earlier. She pulled his cloak around her body, looking uneasy for the first time.

Chapter Eight

Caitrina watched the coming night, trying to still her racing heart. She knew who Etienne was. Jörg confided that, in every lifetime, the principles returned to play their game again. Jacque had been the one known as Marclef in Regana's lifetime. She was Regana, and Etienne was Pauwel.

While she knew Etienne could not kill Jörg-- She shivered, feeling the lord's eyes on her from his place in the next room. Etienne could not kill Jörg, because he was of Haus Kaufmann, and the warrior fated to kill Jörg was of Haus Jäger. She sighed.

There were still too many things that could go wrong, despite the fact that he could not best Jörg in battle. Etienne was a good man beneath the lies he was steeped in, but he was drawn to Caitrina. That made him a dangerous man. Etienne would never willingly let Jörg leave with her. If God was kind, Jörg would injure or kill Etienne. If He wasn't-- Caitrina shuddered. Etienne would sooner kill her than let Caitrina choose Jörg. It had happened in a previous incarnation.

Caitrina's purpose here was simple. She was bait to draw Jörg into a trap, a slaughter. Jörg would not be

so easy to trap. Of that, Caitrina was most heartily sure.

A swirling disturbance appeared in the room with her, and Caitrina launched toward it, knowing Jörg would hold her to his chest and take away this growing unease. Every moment in Etienne's company made her mind ache and her body itch with awareness of who he was. It was maddening to have memories of the souls of her two husbands.

She stopped abruptly, backing from the strange beast in shock. It was a beast. Caitrina was certain of that, but she was also certain that this beast meant her harm. He had her by the arms before she could move out of his reach, or perhaps he moved faster than she could see as Jörg sometimes did. Caitrina screamed as he buried his face in her throat, drinking in her scent.

"Release her, Renald," Etienne barked.

Renald raised his head, smiling down at her, a cold smile that made Caitrina's heart skip in fear. She pulled at his grip ineffectually.

"Yes. You are the one," Renald purred. "He has waited centuries to find you."

Caitrina tried to wrench free again, desperate to escape his touch, but his hands were akin to iron manacles.

Etienne's voice came from just over her shoulder. "Release her or die, beast. You know that your assistance is the only reason I let you live this long."

"Beasts are to her tastes," he taunted her. "Are we not, love?"

"No," Caitrina denied. Her breathing was strangled.

A dark blade passed between them and settled over Renald's heart. The beast released her, and Caitrina retreated to the chair.

Etienne nodded and backed toward her. "You could accept the amulet," he reminded her. "Renald could not touch you."

"Neither could Jörg," she snapped. "I want nothing from you."

"That is not true," he noted calmly. "You want my protection from this beast."

Caitrina's cheeks burned. She didn't bother to deny it. What was the point in lying when he could see the truth?

Etienne glanced at her and nodded in satisfaction. "What does he want with her? Tell me, Renald."

Caitrina rolled her eyes. Etienne still wouldn't call Jörg by name.

Renald smiled that same cold smile. "She is his wife."

"His intended," Etienne corrected, as if the distinction were leagues apart. "Why does he want to wed her?"

"No. Not his intended. His wife. How many lifetimes has it been, dear one? Does he still call you that? Dear one? *Geliebt*?"

Caitrina wiped away a tear. "Six," she whispered. "Six lifetimes, *you damned beast*." She slipped the curse out in the ancient language that Regana spoke in her lifetime, the language that the stone's texts were written in.

Etienne shot her a look of undisguised horror. "The mad deceiver had no wife," he argued weakly.

Renald laughed heartily. "He never told his brother warriors that he had a wife, but he had one. He couldn't wait to sink his cock in her. Could he, dear one?"

"Who was his wife?"

The question was directed to Caitrina. She dropped her gaze, uncomfortable with discussing her marriage with the other man who would like to be her mate, who was her mate in another time and place.

"Who was his wife?" Etienne demanded, his voice taking on an edge of warning.

"What does he call you?" Renald taunted her. "Do you know who you really are?"

She glared at him. *"If Jörg answers that question for me, you will not live to regret it."*

"You do know," Renald mused. "Do you remember? I have heard that you actually remember your lives—Regana."

Etienne turned to her fully, his eyes wide in shock. "Have you the mark?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Renald launched at him, taking advantage of Etienne's preoccupation with her.

"Etienne," she screamed. Caitrina blanched. Minutes ago, she hoped Jörg would kill Etienne, and now she was saving him. She shook her head, trying to reconcile her actions. She would be a fool to let Renald kill Etienne. Caitrina was safer with Etienne than she was with Renald. It was nothing more than that. It could not be.

Caitrina scrambled from the chair as Renald sliced Etienne's upper arm with a set of wicked-looking claws twice again the length of her fingers. The beast

tore at the shoulder of her gown, as she grasped a sword sheathed in display on the wall. She turned back to him, ignoring the strange blade that was the same dark metal of Etienne's dagger. She also ignored the fact that the metal glowed an odd blue color in her hands.

Renald laughed. "You will be mine," he promised. "You know why I want you?"

She shook her head. Caitrina never understood why beasts would pursue her. Regana had never understood it through any of her lives. She only knew that they did.

He reached for her, dodging her clumsy blow then capturing the sword between them and trapping Caitrina between his body and the wall behind her. Renald was erect, his aroused member pressed painfully to her hip.

"You are the light we are all drawn to," he assured her. "Any of our kind would kill to possess you, warrior or beast alike."

"Jörg is not like any of your kind," she noted defiantly.

Renald stilled, falling back from her. Caitrina took a hitching breath, her eyes locked on the dagger protruding from his back in relief.

Etienne rose, blood streaming down his arm. Caitrina stifled the urge to tend to his wound. The feeling was so elemental, that it frightened her in its intensity.

He retrieved his weapon and closed on her, looking uncertain. She stiffened. He was even more dangerous now. If Etienne knew who she and Jörg

were, he surely knew who he was, and he would be even more unwilling to release her.

"Caitrina, if you are Regana, you must let me protect you," he pleaded.

She shook her head. "No. I will not turn from him."

"I know what he wants from you now. He must keep you from your destiny. If you are Regana, you belong with the warriors. You are a child of the stone."

"Lies."

"You are in danger."

"From you," she accused. *Jörg will not harm me. He cannot harm me. I have seen it in his memories.* She backed away, shaking fiercely.

"From him. From—the one called Jörg. He will stop at nothing. He has—"

"Killed me?" Caitrina shook her head.

Etienne nodded, inching toward her again. "Yes. He has killed you."

"It was not that way. I asked to die. I was in melancholy."

"He told you that?" Etienne demanded.

"I remember. I—"

Caitrina swung the sword around as something lunged from behind her. She thrashed as a hand locked around her throat and another over the hilt of the sword.

"No, Franz. Release her," Etienne roared.

She fought for air, clawing at Franz. There was a blur of motion, and the young man backstepped, his eyes wide in surprise. Caitrina was dragged along

with him by his grip. A tearing pain stole her breath. Caitrina crumpled to the floor as Franz recoiled.

Etienne screamed in frustration, cradling her head on his arm and applying pressure to her abdomen that caused dizzying pain. "Caitrina?" he sobbed. "Gods alive, what have I done? I didn't mean to. You know I didn't."

She faded into the black vortex calling for her, dreaming of Jörg meeting her in a halo of sunlight.

* * *

Jörg streamed into the air from the spot in the shade of the carriage that he dematerialized to when he left the battle, not even taking the time to say a proper goodbye to Martin. The human would understand his haste. Caitrina was most important now. There would be time for a proper burial when she was safe.

The healing Earth had returned Jörg to the strength he would need to combat the warriors. He followed his link toward Caitrina, cursing the distance Etienne Lord Kaufmann put between them. It would take him more than a quarter of an hour to reach her side.

Her soul called to him, in unhappiness and in upset. Caitrina hadn't turned from him, but the presence of the Lord Kaufmann confused her. She was in pain. It was always a strain when Regana's soul was presented with both of her husbands.

Jörg smiled. The fact that he felt her so clearly meant that Caitrina had refused the amulet. He had felt her all day — her fear, sadness, strength and fury. Even her struggles were heartening. Every moment

she refused the amulet brought him closer to claiming her again with the full knowledge that she was his alone.

Caitrina passed from nervous preoccupation to happiness then jolted into a fear and dread that made Jörg's fangs extend in the promise of violence. Her reactions confused him, mainly because of the fleeting moment of happiness. Jörg searched his links, looking for one close to her and hoping he was wrong in his assumption.

He growled at the knowledge that Renald was with her. Renald's presence could only mean one thing. Yet again, one of his turned had betrayed him. It was Resten incarnate. Resten was the only one of the principle players from the original encounter who did not reappear with every lifetime, but when he did appear, the end was always at its most painful.

Jörg whipped through the air, calling Renald to him. He was too far away to kill the turned outright. Even his call would take time to work at this distance.

He opened the link to Renald, letting the younger beast's experiences wash over him. Jörg smiled inwardly at Etienne's shock and confusion. *Yes. Now you know what you face – a mad elder in defense of his mate.* Etienne wouldn't be intelligent enough to release Caitrina to Jörg's care. The warriors never were.

Jörg cringed as Renald attacked the distracted lord. While it would save Jörg the trouble of killing the warrior, Caitrina was safe in Etienne's care – much safer than she would be with Renald.

He was too far away to kill Renald, but Jörg could

still affect his mind. The killing blow the beast should have dealt Etienne never fell; the turned suddenly forgetting the threat existed, as Jörg commanded.

Etienne reacted much as Jörg hoped he would, taking a killing blow on Renald. The dying beast's vision faded away, locked on Caitrina's pale, shaking form, a sword made in the style of a sacred weapon clasped in her hands.

Jörg screamed in fury as he felt the pain and panic of an attack on her person. *They will die painfully for this*, he vowed. Jörg faltered as he felt the deathblow. *No! They've killed her.*

He sped on, her pain searing him worse than even his transformation had. He felt empty, a burned husk left when the starfire destroyed the best of him, pitiful as that bit was.

Jörg stood over the dead form of Franz before his body had completely formed; striding into the room as his clothing took shape around his body.

Etienne made no move to defend himself. The warrior knelt with Caitrina cradled in his arm, the opposite hand exerting useless pressure on her wound. The sacred weapon fouled with her blood lay next to her knee. "I meant to hit him," he whispered hoarsely. "I meant to kill Franz for his lack of control. Ani forgive me, I never meant to hurt you."

"How dare you touch her," Jörg roared. He sent Etienne skidding across the floor with a wound to match Caitrina's. *Let the beast die slowly, as slowly as the gods will grant him.*

She didn't hit the floor. Jörg cradled her to his chest, moving faster than the human eye could track.

He scanned his eyes over the wound, heartsick. Jörg couldn't heal this much damage. He was too late.

No. I am not too late to save her – if I turn her. Jörg grimaced. He hadn't wanted this damned existence for her, but there were advantages. Caitrina wouldn't age and leave him. She was incapable of carrying his child either way. She already knew and accepted that fact. Jörg kissed her brow, torn. He wouldn't turn her unless Caitrina wished it. Jörg would let her die now, if that was her wish.

"Caitrina," he crooned, touching her pale cheek. She was cool to the touch. It would have to be soon. Her body was weak, the movement of blood in her veins sluggish. "*Regana, Geliebt Mein.* Caitrina, look at me." He coerced her, knowing he had to make the offer, even if she refused him. The outlay of power was immaterial now. Etienne's injury and the pup's death would bring the warriors whether or not he gave them added incentive to come.

She forced her eyes open, raising a bloodstained hand to his cheek. Caitrina shook her head, a single tear escaping her eye. "I do not—leave you," she repeated his words of that morning in a gasp. "I will come for you again."

"You do not have to leave me. If you feed from me—" Jörg couldn't continue. Could he do this to her? If she asked, he would. He could not lose her if there were any alternative to it.

"No," Etienne protested in a whisper, dragging himself toward them. "The stone's curse. You know a woman will not survive with her sanity intact."

"Be still," Jörg growled at him. They had not

attempted a female turned. There were dire warnings of what would happen if it was attempted. *She is printed to me. Printing saved my kind emotions. It will save her sanity. It must.*

Her eyes widened. Her fear seared him. She would leave him rather than stay with him in his form.

"We could be together always," he reminded her.

"Do not lie, foul beast," Etienne groaned.

"I am—no hunter," she argued weakly. She wanted to be with him.

"No. You are not. I would provide from you. You could drink from me as I have taken from you." *Please. Please, accept this.* "Please, do not leave me," he begged of her. Jörg grimaced at his weakness. He had no right to ask this of her.

Caitrina nodded.

"No," Etienne gasped, grasping for his discarded blade.

Jörg swept the blade away and tossed the warrior to the far corner of the room without taking his eyes from Caitrina's. "Do not fear me," he pleaded. "Do not fear what you will be."

Caitrina stroked his cheek. "I do not fear."

He willed away the illusion of his tunic. Jörg extended a single blade from his fingertip and sliced a cut in his chest, inches below the blood mark she loved. She watched the black blood well up in amazement.

Jörg brought her mouth to the spot, his heart pounding in anticipation of her touch. "Then drink," he urged her. *Quickly.* Without pressure on the wound, her lifeblood poured from her all the faster.

He swallowed a groan of pleasure as Caitrina collected the first drops on her tongue, tentatively, cautiously sampling his flavor. She pressed her lips to the thin line of the cut and suckled at him. Jörg hardened in the knowledge that she accepted him so fully, that she would join him forever.

"No," Etienne sobbed.

"Do not seek to stop us," Jörg warned him, though Etienne was in no condition to do so. He sent information to Caitrina through the blood link, as he did for all his turned, all the things she would need to know to be safe in her new life, all the powers and limitations she had.

Her suckling became more insistent, and Jörg groaned in response. He stroked her taut nipple, dreaming of the time when she could rise from the healing soil with him. He would make love to her as soon as she was able. Waiting would be a hardship, but it was well worth the trade of having her with him forever.

Etienne uttered a series of harsh curses, and Jörg snapped his eyes open, staring at his errant hand in dismay. Caitrina was injured. This was not the time to fondle her, especially in front of this dog, though there was a perverse pleasure in knowing that his rival watched while Jörg touched her.

Jörg broke her hold on him before she could weaken him too much to complete his task. With Caitrina in his arms, he stood and left the house far behind. She would not be ready for the rigors of travel by flight for several hours.

He smiled as he felt the blood circulating through

her begin to rebuild her system, stopping her bleeding and changing her body chemistry to that of a beast. Caitrina was calm, letting the changes happen without fighting them. That was good. It was only painful if you fought the changes. Jörg had once tried to tell Pauwel that.

"Sleep," he soothed her. "When you complete your transformation, I will fly you to our home and lay in the healing earth with you, our essences mixed in the rich soil. And, when your healing is complete, you will feed from me again and become strong."

Jörg kissed her forehead tenderly. "You will live a life of bliss with me. We will travel where you wish—foreign lands, the finest entertainment, loving where and when we choose."

He laughed as her sleepy musings filtered into his mind.

"You wish to use our ghosting ability to make love in a crowded theater?" he teased. "Yes. That will be my second gift to you," Jörg promised.

"Second?" She experimented with the link between them.

"First, I will make love to you in our bed."

"While you feed me?"

The longing in her voice made him painfully aware of the days it would take her to heal. He groaned in arousal that he could not sate for at least three days.

"Absolutely."

Chapter Nine

December 2nd, 1497

Caitrina tried to force her eyes open, but the blackness remained. She couldn't move. She couldn't feel her limbs. Caitrina tried to scream, but she could make no sound, feel no air in her lungs. Her mind rebelled.

"Calm, Geliebt." Jörg's voice came from all around her, in her, a soothing touch of warmth when she felt nothing else.

She tried to speak again, but there was nothing.

"Speak with the link," he instructed her calmly. *"Think to me."*

"Jörg?" It was calming. She did exist. *"Where are we? Why can I not feel or see or move? Why can I not speak naturally?"*

A feeling like a sigh caressed her. *"We rest in the soil beneath our home. Do you remember your injuries?"*

Memories came to her, hazy memories of intense pain, fear, blood. Then there was a calm, the taste of rich spice and power. There was knowledge. She was what Jörg was now. She could not feel or behave as a human, because she was disembodied and her

essence was scattered through the soil with Jörg's, as he promised.

"Yes. This is the healing sleep. You may not rise yet. Your injuries will require several more days to knit. Do you feel them?"

It wasn't exactly a feeling of pain, but the realization that she was not whole. "Yes."

"Good. You must sleep now. I will wake you when I have fed sufficiently, when it is safe for you to take a solid form and join me."

"Do not leave me," she begged. Though she could not feel his arms around her, the thought of lying alone in the soil frightened her.

"I do not leave you, dear one. I will always come for you, but I must feed deeply for the next few nights so that you may drink your fill when you wake and not weaken me."

"I understand." Caitrina didn't like the idea of being in the soil without him, but she would not compromise Jörg for her whims. He had to feed to be strong for her.

"Sleep."

Caitrina felt him slip from her mind as his push sent her from consciousness.

* * *

December 5th, 1497

Jörg squatted on the ground above Caitrina, smiling. Her injuries were healed at last. She could join him. He sent the command, instructing her to solid form via the link between them.

She materialized, weaving on her feet and sinking into Jörg's arms. Caitrina held tight to him, trying to find her center while her urges warred within her. She was weak. The drive to feed was maddening to her. It all but buried her other urges.

He swept her to him, striding toward the rooms that were prepared for them. "Soon," he crooned. "I will sate all your hungers very soon."

Caitrina moved restlessly when he laid her on their bed. Her eyes glowed a hot red that showed her lack of control. Luckily, she was too weakened to escape him in the form of a mist.

Jörg took a calming breath. "You must feed," he instructed her. "If you feed, your beast will become more manageable. You will have to learn to feed. The three easiest sites for you to learn from are the large pulse point in the thigh, the one in the arm and —"

She stroked a hand over his neck, her fangs lengthening. Caitrina's hunger was fierce. She listened to the blood rushing under his skin intently. He shivered in the depth of her need for him.

"Yes. That is what you need," he confirmed for her. Jörg raised her in his arms, nestling her mouth to the column of his throat. "Feel the blood rush for you. Take what you need."

Jörg steeled himself for a brutal attack this first time. Caitrina had no experience reining in the beast that held her in its grasp, and the beast was strong in its urge to live while she was weak from her healing. Jörg would likely spend quite a bit of time controlling the beast for her until she learned the proper control, but he would let it have free rein this first time. She

needed to know the danger of the beast intimately.

Caitrina licked at his throat in imitation of the times he took her blood. She groaned as her fangs sank deep. Jörg stiffened at the pain. Caitrina took from him hungrily, and he hardened despite the discomfort involved. There was something inherently sensual in watching her feed from him. Was this what she felt when he fed from her?

"Yes."

A spike of pleasure wiped the pain from Jörg's mind. He moaned as Caitrina stroked his length through the illusion of breeches he wore. Jörg removed them with a thought, allowing her free rein to touch. Her suckling slowed, as Caitrina brought her urges to take his blood under control. Her hunger was being sated. Her beast would demand that she sate other hungers.

"Take what you need," he offered. "I am yours." Jörg stroked his fingers into her depths, smiling as she bowed to him, her eyes opening wide in surprise. "Yes. It is always better when you feed. Is it better when you are being fed from?" he teased, knowing it was.

"Now," she demanded, moving her body smoothly over his and forcing him back to their bed beneath her. She straddled him, seeking his cooperation.

Jörg teased her further, playing his cock only a few finger widths in her body.

"Now!"

He laughed aloud as Caitrina tried her fledgling coercion on him. It would not work, of course, even if she were stronger, but she was desperate for him.

Jörg clamped his hands on her hips as she tried to force her body over him, offering a silent show of his strength in comparison to her own. Caitrina removed her mouth from him, a warning flashing in her red-tinged eyes.

"Now," he assured her, filling her abruptly.

Caitrina's eyes closed in ecstasy. She drank in the feeling of his length as if it had been centuries for her instead of days.

Jörg urged her mouth back to his throat. "Feed," he whispered. "Take everything I have to give."

She licked the blood pooled on his chest and neck, then suckled at him again. "*Will you give me my memories as you gave me your knowledge?*" she requested. Her mind was clearing now that the beast's needs were being met.

"All of them. You have my vow." Jörg filled her with his body as he filled her mind with memories of all of her lives. He filled her with his seed as he gave her the memories of himself with her in the present life.

Caitrina closed the punctures at his throat, sated in every way she would require. Her fingers played at his chest. "Is true feeding like that?" she asked quietly.

"You will not feed from anyone but me," he decided.

She raised her head, biting her lower lip in confusion. Her fangs, not fully retracted, left adorable dimples in the deep red of her full lips. "Why?"

Jörg sighed, stroking her curls between his fingers. "You remember the moment when you had to have

me inside you? You remember how you felt like you might go mad without it? You would have done anything to have it."

Caitrina nodded slowly, a blush covering her cheeks and rushing to her breasts.

"It will be like that every time you feed. You will want that completion, even when you deny yourself the pleasure of it. You are not strong enough to fight your beast. You may never be that strong."

"If I feed and come to you," she began, trying to reason a way out of his concern.

Jörg shook his head. "You will want it at the moment of feeding. You will want it with an intensity beyond what you felt when you fed from me. You will not care if you feed from a man or a woman. You will want the ecstasy of orgasm no matter which you hold in your arms. You will not feed from anyone but me. Am I understood?"

"Do you feel that?" she whispered.

"Yes, but my beast and I came to an agreement long ago." He smiled warmly and teased her jaw with his teeth in a gentle warning. "When you have been on this Earth for a thousand years, and have leashed the beast within you as well, we will discuss you feeding from another."

Caitrina laughed lightly and kissed him, remembering at the last moment to cleanse his blood from her mouth. She added the taste of berries and spice for him. "*I do not want to leash my beast. Feed me again. Feed me in every way you can feed my hungers.*"

Epilogue

March 10th, 1503

Veriel of Regana's soul

Time and time again, I find you my love.
I rush to your side when I hear your call.
Your need flies to me on wings of a dove,
And at your feet to serve, I gladly fall.
To protect you, I always join the brawl,
But, ne'er are you mine to hold in the end,
Though to every whim of yours I would bend.

Jörg came to consciousness slowly. Something was wrong, but he couldn't place what it was. Caitrina's essence wasn't in the soil with him, but that wasn't unusual in itself. Caitrina required less sleep than Jörg did, and she typically rose before him and waited for him in the manor above. He smiled. She was often clothed in some illusion to test his control — or nude in a place she wished him to take her — and ready to sate her hungers again and again, and he loved every moment of it.

He streamed to their bedchamber and

materialized, already hard in anticipation of her touch. They had been together for more than five years—five years of light, laughter, and love. There had always been intense love, physically and emotionally.

Jörg furrowed his brow in confusion. The manor was oddly still, bereft of the excitement of Caitrina's youth and energy. "Caitrina?" he called, though he knew there would be no answer. Where would she go? It was understood that she was not to leave the circle of his protection. Caitrina balked at that order from time to time, but she had never disobeyed him.

What other possibility is there? No one could have taken her from within the walls without Jörg knowing her plight. No warrior was that strong. No beast was. Even his brother elders were not capable of besting Jörg. The idea of humans besting Caitrina, let alone Jörg, was ludicrous. No, Caitrina had not been distressed. This was one of her child-like games.

He plucked at the link between them uneasily. It was unfocused. Caitrina wasn't blocking him. She would be incapable of such a thing even if she tried, but what could cloud the link? Jörg knew that Caitrina needed a sense of her self-worth. She needed to know that he saw her as an equal, but this was a dangerous game, one he could not allow her to play at.

"Caitrina," he ordered. "*Come to me. I will take you out later this night.*"

There was no response. Jörg paced the room. It wasn't like Caitrina to ignore him this way. Worse, even if she were far away, he should have a sense that

she heard his call. There was nothing—complete silence that unnerved him.

“Caitrina? Where are you? I will come to you.”

He ran a hand through his hair. The link was strange, like nothing he had ever encountered with a turned or human. Drugs did not accomplish such a thing, nor did drink or injury. What was this attack on their bond? Jörg tapped into her mind, something he promised not to do when Caitrina complained that it made her seem a child who was in need of leading strings. He couldn’t hear her thoughts or see and feel the world around her. Only a vague sense of need assaulted his mind.

Jörg strode across the floor, launching skyward as a mist. He sped after the link, praying with every league that his connection to her would crystallize once more. It didn’t. The change in distance made no difference in the clarity of the link.

He found her standing over a dead woman, her face stained in blood. Caitrina’s breathing was quick and uneven. She looked at him without comprehension.

“Caitrina,” he called in a soothing voice.

His mind supplied the answer numbly. Caitrina had gone feral, as his brothers’ turned females had gone feral. They had tried little before giving up on the women. Jörg would not be so quick to discard any possibility. Resuming a sexual relationship did not turn them back to what they once were. If anything, they were worse.

Jörg locked on her bloodstained face in dismay. *“Feeding,”* he mused. His brethren had not taken the

care Jörg had with their mates. Their women had hunted almost immediately – and gone feral just as quickly. Jörg had always provided for Caitrina, though she wanted to prove she could do so for herself. It was feeding on humans that destroyed their minds. Why had he never seen it before?

“Caitrina,” he called again, easing toward her so as not to startle her. If feeding from humans destroyed them, perhaps feeding from him would reverse the damage. He had to restrain Caitrina until he found a cure for her. Jörg was unlike his damned brothers. He would not kill her simply because she had become troublesome. He would find a way to have her back.

She met his eyes, and Jörg allowed himself a moment of hope. If she remembered him, perhaps Caitrina was not completely gone. Then she lashed out, digging claws deep into his chest. Jörg fell back, cursing the pain as she fled the alley. He pushed to his feet, following the link again despite the blood loss that would drive him to ground.

Caitrina never saw the warrior who took her life, lost in the madness her feeding wrought. Jörg screamed in rage as he felt the sacred weapon take her heart. It was the only injury there was no way to heal. It was the single injury that she could not survive. He beheaded the warrior before the man turned to him – *Stephen of KlingeStütze*.

Jörg caught her to his chest, weeping at the sight of her covered in her own blood and dying in his arms – for the sixth time in his life. He screamed again, a scream the likes of which he hadn’t uttered since Regana was ripped from him as he went to ground.

She touched his face; her eyes clear again in her pain, in the “freeing” of her that the warrior accomplished. *“I am sorry. I did not know. Tell me in my next life. Do not let me make this mistake again,”* she pleaded. The light left her eyes before Jörg could offer his assurances.

Jörg howled in frustration to the cold, heartless stars. He was alone again.

He didn’t think as he went about his routine. How could so monumental and shattering an event become routine? Jörg tried not to contemplate that as he buried Caitrina and burned their home.

It was like this with every incarnation of Regana. That first time, Gawen buried her and the villagers burned his home. Jörg left his life behind this way with each loss since then. There was nothing left here for him when her soul departed.

Departed, only to be born again when the pain is not so fresh! Jörg shook his head. He could not live with this again—with losing her again. *The next time her soul calls, I will not go to her.*

Even as he decided it, Jörg resigned himself to the folly of that thought. He would go, because his soul was bound to hers. He would go, because she would be in danger from humans, beasts, and warriors alike. He would go, because he was printed to her and could not live without her while Regana lived, in any lifetime she lived.

Jörg would go to every incarnation and suffer every loss, because the gods had set this as his unending punishment for turning traitor to them. They would torture him with mere moments in her

arms and dreams of holding her in a mid-day sun to fill the long years between. As he had been for more than a millennia, Jörg was well and truly damned.

Hunter born.

The words seemed to float to him on the breeze, a taunt from the stone to his ears alone. The vision of Regana as he knew her appeared in the flames. He would hold her in a mid-day sun and be pursued no more. When? When the warrior of *Haus Jäger* came for him? Would this be his reward in the afterlife? To be reunited with Regana in one of her many forms?

Hunter born.

“When?” he shouted back, but there was only silence, as there had been for the last fifty generations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brenna Lyons lives in Haverhill, MA with her husband, three children, and a zoo of pets. She was born and raised in the Hazelwood/Glenwood area of Pittsburgh, PA and spent thirteen years as a Navy wife, nine of them in Virginia Beach, VA.

She is a poet and novelist who has a poem in the Treble Heart release of Full Moon Inheritance by Jacqueline Elliott. Brenna has three novels out with eXtasy Books, another six contracted with them and two more coming by early 2004 with her other publisher, Treble Heart Press. She has another six novels on submission with two more houses and six more in draft.

Brenna enjoys the Society for Creative Anachronism, and is a member of such groups as Broad Universe, EPIC and EPPRO.

Brenna holds a BS in Accounting and a Certificate of Computer Programming. Why? An auditing teacher commented that she would either “make the perfect auditor or the perfect thief,” and she had been writing for eleven years with little professional training— in effect, a thief of attention by misdirection.

She enjoys talking to readers, and can be reached via her site at www.geocities.com/brennalyons4168.