

# **Of Blood and Blessings**

## **L. Shannon**

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## Chapter 1

Amelia Delacroix, of the lost Delacroix fortunes, was in deep trouble, even deeper than usual. "Stop it, Monsieur Jones. Please, I have to take the order of ale to the men in the corner." Monsieur Jones had been chasing her since she'd started the job a few weeks ago, but now he was insistent.

Jones held her pinned against the wall of the back room. His drooling mouth slid down her throat to the tops of her breasts which he proceeded to lick where they rose above the tight bodice of her dress. His hands pinched and squeezed her body painfully.

"Please, Monsieur..." He cut off her plea with his mouth. His tongue pushed between her lips, drawing a whimper from Amelia.

"Oh, Amelia, you will be a good mount once you are tamed to the saddle."

She didn't want to be a mount for him or any other. His hands brought nothing but pain and the touch of his mouth inspired only the rise of bile. How could the other girls let him touch them like they did? *Non*, not only that. They actually encouraged him. It made no sense to her. She managed to pull out of his clumsy embrace, and scrambled several feet away to grab up the ale. Jones' growl sounded behind her as she flew into the main room of the tavern.

The men waiting for the ale called out churlish comments as she approached.

"Pardon, Monsieur, pardon." Amelia set the mugs on the table, swatting away the hand that grabbed at her ass. The men who came here had no manners. Even her short time working in the tavern had shown her the gutter into which a civilized man could fall. Where else would a man feel it was allowed to grope at a woman who was not his wife?

A high-pitched giggle pealed from across the room.

“Looks like Letta will be warming her back!” the man to Amelia’s right called out. “How about you, love?” He yanked Amelia into his lap and pawed at her skirts. The man smacked his lips against hers and pushed one hand under her skirts to her nearly exposed thigh.

Her body revolted against his touch. Her stomach clenched. Her head pounded and her vision swam. *She had to get away!* She pushed at his chest to no avail. Finally, one hand caught the edge of his mug, almost upending the ale. Amelia gripped the handle and dumped it down the man’s front, soaking herself as well.

“What the hell!” He shot to his feet, dropping Amelia to the floor in a damp heap.

Amelia leapt to her feet, rushing away while the others laughed and taunted the man. She slipped into the back room to find a towel for the spilled ale and threatening tears. When her parents had been alive they’d never have let a gentleman treat her so roughly.

Why did these men have to act like that? She didn’t mind that they wanted to touch the other women, but she didn’t want them pawing her. The other girls at least seemed to enjoy it. Letta told her to grow up the last time she had complained about Jones. In fact, her exact words had been, “Why do you whine so much? Jones sports a better sword than many a man. You should enjoy it like I do.” But Amelia had no intention of enjoying what he sported. The best she could manage was not discharging her lunch upon him.

A sound interrupted her thoughts. A low groan of obvious pleasure drew her gaze to a partially hidden alcove created by stacked crates. Jones rested, facing her while Letta knelt between his thighs. The sound had come from Jones, but Letta made tiny mewling cries as she slid her mouth forward over his “sword” and then drew back. Jones’ fingers clenched the girl’s hair. His white-knuckled grip forced her mouth to ride his shaft.

Letta gripped his hips, appearing to enjoy the act as much as Jones. How did she find pleasure with a man's penis within her mouth? Did it taste differently than other flesh? Yet, Letta obviously was enjoying herself.

Jones pulled the girl upward and crushed her under an open-mouthed kiss. Letta pushed against him, her hands framing his face before moving lower. One hand gripped his swollen shaft, sliding over it from head to hilt. The reddened flesh jumped with the contact when Jones growled into Letta's mouth.

Jones ducked, grabbing the edge of Letta's skirts, dragging them up one thigh. Her lifted leg exposed her lack of underclothing. Letta's head fell back as Jones shifted and plunged his thick rod into her body. Her breasts were free of her corset and bounced as she rode him.

How could he even fit into her? How could Letta enjoy something so much, when the thought of such acts with Jones made Amelia physically ill? Jones' touch only brought Amelia pain and humiliation when he forced his attention on her, but Letta certainly looked happy. The mystery eluded Amelia. Was there something wrong with Letta? Or was she the one who was different? Or was it Jones who made the difference?

Letta's moans grew louder and then, she was shaking and crying out. Jones grunted and slammed into Letta.

Then his gaze locked on Amelia. "How nice of you to join us, Amelia. You can be next."

\* \* \*

"Time to put an end to your wretched existence."

Grant grunted as Claude's dagger sank deep into his chest. Wretched? His existence had been rather pleasant until the disloyal cur stabbed him, which definitely wasn't proving to be the high point of the evening.

Grant's demonic power flooded through him, protecting him from any mortal harm. When Claude's eyes widened, he realized his powers must have given his friend a glimpse of his true, far from human form.

The knife stung like the devil, at least until his surging powers dissolved the blade, leaving no damage other than the torn shirt. The knife handle fell to the thick carpet with a quiet thud. "Now, why did you have to do that? You know this is my favorite shirt." Grant traced the edge of the torn silk with a carefully manicured fingernail.

"I don't give a *shit* about your shirt. I know what you are!" Claude backed away, knocking over a parlor chair and bumping into the fireplace mantle.

"And what am I -- a good friend? A companion in society? More than a bit tipsy?" Grant hated these melodramatic scenes that humans always felt the need to play out when they discovered he wasn't one of them.

"A bloody demon!" Claude's nearly hysterical scream hurt worse than the damn dagger.

"Yes, but who let the proverbial cat from the sack?" He wasn't really surprised that Claude learned what he was. He had been in town long enough for a few differences to be noticed. Especially since he now looked twenty years younger than Claude and his other human friends in Paris. Even Claude's youngest brother, Pierre, at thirty, looked older than Grant. Actually, he was surprised it had taken them so long to figure out this version of their truth.

"Does it matter? I know that you must die." Claude's hands clenched, yanking at his tailored jacket hard enough to rip the hem free.

"Well, this conversation is getting boring. Can we move onto a better one? Or better yet, forget the whole issue and try that new tavern on Long Street?" Much as Grant wanted this problem to simply go away, Claude was only becoming more agitated.

"What?" Claude ran nervous fingers through his hair. "You're a demon! We put it together after you left that girl last week. Pierre found the marks on her neck. That's when it all began to make sense. We can't leave a demon to run loose and kill innocent girls. I've been sworn to kill you. I'm not going to socialize with your kind."

"But, my dear friend, you have been socializing with me for nearly two decades now. Why must that all change because of one small fact that neither of us has any control over?"

"Because... Just because." Claude pulled another knife and threw it at Grant to make his less than precise point.

Grant was faster this time and dissolved the knife before it reached him or could mutilate his clothing any further. The best tailors of Paris were far too difficult for any sane being to damage clothing wastefully.

At least he had offered the proverbial olive branch, even if the undeserving would-be killer hadn't accepted. "So is that it then? Well, I will give you this, you picked a hell of a way to tell me to shove off." Grant flew across the room and dragged Claude into his tight, unforgiving grip. "Sweet dreams, my friend." He stroked one hand over Claude's forehead, and then settled Claude's slack body into a nearby chair.

His friend would have ample time to sleep off the effects of all they had imbibed and then, within the week, he would be back to normal. Hopefully having forgotten all the nonsense and assassination plans.

The bigger question was, who else knew or suspected? Who would be next to attack him? Surely Claude would include both his brothers in his efforts. Grant groaned at the thought. The hassle of dodging would-be killers simply wasn't worth the benefit.

It was time to leave Paris and move to a less hostile environment. Cities tended to lose all appeal when friends decided to, how had he put it? Oh, right, put an end to his wretched... Never mind, these things happened now and then.

So he would leave. Grant grabbed up his cloak, but paused when he saw the door to the house standing wide open. He was sure they had closed it when coming in.

He strode out into the light rain. The cool weather fit his mood and fortunately, he could keep it from ruining his clothes.

The door to the tavern just ahead slammed open, followed by a man's cold, angry voice. "Don't you leave, Amelia!"

He stepped toward the tavern to listen.

"I won't be your whore." The slight tremor in the girl's words pulled at some long forgotten part of Grant. "I'm good at serving drink. Why can't that be enough?"

"You should face it. This is what I hired you for. Surely, it will prove your best skill. Even tonight, you managed to spill ale on a gentleman. If you will not accept my generous offer, you can starve on the street." A cruel chuckle, then, "And that innocent babe of a brother will starve, as well. Go ahead and run. Be back tomorrow or I will hire another girl for the position."

A petite bundle flew out the doorway, heedless of all around her. Her head bent, she took three steps and plowed into Grant's chest. He steadied her in his arms, enjoying her sudden warmth while the door slammed shut behind her. Her wide, green gaze jumped to his, forcing the breath from his lungs like a physical blow. His senses, both human and demon, burst painfully to life. She was lovely, soft and delicate. Her slightly upturned nose was spattered with kissable freckles. Her chestnut hair tumbled about her shoulders in damp ringlets. Her sweet scent overpowered the tavern smells that clung to her. He could feel and hear her fast heartbeat, calling to his own.

Grant's senses swam. Her beauty, scent and feel pulled at him, blinding him to the world outside their embrace. As she pulled back from him, he realized he'd been lowering his head to indulge fully in her, to taste her essence, to feed on her blood. *Right here in the damn street.* He struggled to control himself and his lengthening fangs, letting her step away from him. His hands held her a moment longer before he shook free of the painful need. "Beg your pardon, Mademoiselle. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Fine, thank you." Her voice quavered, betraying the lie. Her beautiful eyes were tinged red, possibly from crying. He heard her too fast heartbeat and felt the tremors that shook her body, giving lie to her assessment.

"You are cold and quite wet, but not fine." Far from fine, she had just escaped a man who wanted to use her body and run directly into a demon who also wanted that and to feast on her blood. Her luck was definitely not improving. And neither was his wit. The girl was almost laughing at his idiotic appraisal of her condition.

"It is raining and I'm sure you may have noticed you are wet also."



"So I am." What a silly conversation. But the girl was wet and cold, in addition to being upset from the previous argument. Now, he was the one keeping her out in the weather. She needed better protection than the thin wrap she wore.

How completely ridiculous, that Grant should be concerned about her catching a chill, when he ached to sink his fangs into the young woman's soft throat. The burning thirst for this woman's blood raced through Grant as if he would die without it. For her own safety, he needed to be away from her.

Grant swept off his long cape and draped it about her shoulders before she could protest. "You need this more than I do."

\* \* \*

"No, Monsieur, I couldn't!" Amelia objected, but the handsome stranger stepped past her and was gone into the darkness. "Monsieur?"

"Hold tight to my cape. I will come for it soon," the voice whispered, as if carried on the wind from a great distance. The deep, rich tone sent a shiver down Amelia's spine. She'd never heard such a voice before.

Amelia gripped the warm cape about her, breathing in the sensual musk of it. The strange scent warmed her even to her toes. It brought to mind a cozy evening with a lover, cuddled in front of a warm fire. *Such decadence.* Her unseemly thoughts strayed further, wondering what kind of lover the stranger would be. He would be slow and gentle.

How could her mind stray in such a way? *Because this was different...* The touch of other men scared her, but this man's hands warmed her and left her feeling protected. She didn't know him. He could be dangerous, cruel. He could be anything.

But he was also generous to loan his cape.

Her home was a long walk from the tavern and the rain continued to pelt down on her. How fortunate to have the cape keeping her mostly dry. That brought Amelia's wandering mind back to the strange, generous man with the intoxicating scent. His kindness lifted her flagging spirit.

She didn't even know his name. Would she recognize him in other circumstances? Yes, she would remember his intense silver-gray eyes, his long black hair and, of course, his height. He towered over her five feet, making her feel delicate and more feminine than ever before.

The drastic difference in their heights made her think of the long cape. Amelia looked down to discover it was exactly as she feared. The too long hem had been dragging through the wet and muddy streets. It was filthy and the fine material was probably ruined. Lifting it higher, she hurried the rest of the way.

She reached her building and quietly entered the first floor flat. She'd left her brother, Jean, with the elderly couple who lived there. In exchange, she did their laundry on her days off. As usual, Madame Pentreaux left a candle burning for her. Her brother barely stirred when she gathered him into her arms, blew out the candle and closed the door behind her.

The two flights of stairs seemed longer and steeper this night. Jean's weight was a sweet but heavy burden. Finally within their rented room, she undressed Jean and tucked him into his own small bed, while remembering his happiness that the room had two beds despite its small size. Tears stung her eyes at the thought of leaving if she couldn't keep the position at the tavern.

Once Jean was settled for the rest of the night, Amelia looked over their precarious budget. Unlike many, she had enough of an education to do sums. Although, at this moment, Amelia wished she lacked that skill. She only had a few days to find another job or to give in to Jones. The thought of Jones touching her as he had Letta sent nausea rolling through her empty stomach. If she couldn't find other work, could she tolerate his touch?

Yes. She could. She could do anything that was needed for them to survive.

## Chapter Two

Grant watched the girl gradually slump over the table in exhaustion. At the sight, tenderness restrained his hunger and lust. The raging thirst was pushed aside by the urge to care for her, to ease her burdens.

The small room was barely furnished. The place was neat and clean, but desolate. He went to Amelia and gently cradled her light frame in his arms. When she stirred, Grant laid his palm to her forehead and willed her back into deep sleep.

Her strength of will amazed him. This small girl managed so many responsibilities without help from a father or husband. Not only did she work to support herself and her brother, but also fought to do so with dignity. She was so slight to carry such a burden, both real and emotional. She was far too thin to have missed dinner on this or any night.

What could he do for her? Would she even accept his help?

He carried her to the narrow bed, settling her carefully. When he loosened his hold, her hand lifted and tangled in his loose hair. She moaned softly and snuggled against his chest. Fire burned through him from scalp to groin. He slid onto the bed with her, shifting her more fully onto his lap. Though still asleep, she burrowed into his arms. His breath caught at the trust she offered him. Trust he was far from deserving.

Yet, Amelia felt right in his arms. Her petite curves fit perfectly against him. Grant sat there, slowly relaxing back against the wall. She moved with him, never losing the contact between their bodies.

Her dress bunched into lumps, an irritation he could do without and was surely not pleasant for Amelia either. A bit at a time, he removed her shoes and stockings. He loosened her corset and eased her out of the heavier outer dress, leaving Amelia in her simple shift. Even in the dark, her satin skin glowed, drawing his hands. He stroked a

long finger down her bare arm. The gentle touch singed him, his cock hardening painfully within his suddenly tight breeches.

Amelia shifted restlessly and cried out against his chest, "No, please don't. Please stop." Her hand tightened on his shirt. Her imagined fears clenched at his soul. Amelia should never fear being touched, being loved. Her body, so feminine, was made for the loving arts.

What had happened in her past to scare her so? If the tavern owner was guilty of more than threats, a merciless death awaited him. Grant's arms stiffened around her, crushing her against his chest.

She whimpered in her dream terrors.

He could help her. But did he dare? Thanks to his mother's demon blood, Grant was more than able to enter and guide her dreams. He could chase away any lingering nightmares and replace them with whatever she wished for.

Amelia shifted against him, her slender hip pushing into his already aching cock. The sharp pain dampened his arousal, helping him focus on her needs. He would ease her fears, and then leave her before his various hungers did more than scare her.

Grant wrapped her in his embrace, pulling the light coverlet over them both. He brushed his lips over Amelia's, resting his cheek against her forehead. Grant extended his thoughts, coaxing her mind to open to him.

Her dreams swirled in chaotic circles about the tavern owner and his foul hands on her. Her flesh crawled. Her stomach rebelled. The man, Jones, had forced her against the wall, his hands mauling her.

Her fear and anger became his. He could tear this man to pieces. He would.

Amelia shoved the man away before Grant could interfere. Once pushed, Jones disappeared and Amelia stared at Grant. Her green eyes studied him warily. Grant merged his mind with hers, allowing them to communicate here in her dreams without words.

She wondered if he would hurt her too.

"I will not hurt you." He held out a hand, offering his strength and a choice.

"Who are you?" She slowly stepped away from the squalid wall and reached for his hand. The connection was immediate and powerful. Fingers burned, welded together, bonded.

His heart raced as her unexpected trust filled him with excitement. "We met earlier. My name is Grant." Was his voice breathy? How strange.

The tavern faded away, replaced by darkness. "Where are we?"

"Where would you like to be?" Grant marveled at her control of the background, which was unusual. Once he sought command over a sleeper's dream, he rarely lost that control, but she had a strong mind and he could let her hold the reins if that was what she wished.

"I don't know. I don't understand." She moved closer to him, taking comfort from his strength. Their bodies brushed lightly and she gripped his hand like a lifeline. She was strong, but unsure of herself.

"Would you like to walk in my garden? The flowers are lovely, though not as beautiful as you are." He offered the suggestion and let her consider it. Each touch between them awakened his senses in ways that were usually limited in this dream realm. The brush of her breast against his arm hardened his cock and had his fangs throbbing. He wanted her and here in this world of their making, they could do as they wanted. If she was willing, this could be a very fulfilling dream.

Amelia nodded and light poured around them. Flowers sprung up and crowded the narrow flagstone path where they stood. The flowers were his creation, a reflection of the garden behind his mansion, but the light was her choice. He would have preferred a moonlit walk in the garden, but here in dreams, the light would cause no pain to his sensitive eyes.

She looked up at him, her perfect face framed with her glowing curls, and smiled. Her contentment filled him. Grant's lips fell slowly to meet hers in a sweet union. Arousal fanned through him in welcome warmth. While controlling his lengthening fangs, he stroked her soft lips with his tongue, teasing them open. Even here in the dream realm, he needed her desperately.

She accepted the invasion, pressing into him, her free hand slipping to his neck, feathering through the long hair at his nape.

The gentle tugs sent tingles dancing across his scalp and through his body. "Amelia," he sighed. "What are you doing to me?"

She pulled back just enough to whisper, "I don't understand this need, but I must touch you. I must taste you. What is this devilry that you can cause such conduct when I know I should not do so?" She kissed him again, followed with a tentative nibble to his full lower lip.

"You may touch or taste me any way you wish. I quite enjoy your fancy." He did more than enjoy, he craved. With each touch, Grant grew harder and hungrier. Still, he would take nothing not offered freely.

A long padded bench appeared to the side of the path and she tugged him toward it. He sat and pulled her back into his arms. She stood between his thighs and kissed him. "You do taste intoxicating." The new angle allowed her more control and he relinquished it willingly. Her tongue tickled at his lips, but hesitated when he opened to her.

Grant's hands roamed freely. Amelia's waist narrowed then flared upward into lush breasts. So perfect for his hand to memorize. Her nipple pebbled under his wandering fingers. Through her plain dress, he rolled the tip with thumb and forefinger, tightening it into a nub with his exploration. Her body tensed, and then, she relaxed and moaned into his mouth with a breathy sigh. Then, with a surprisingly aggressive surge, she sucked his tongue into her mouth.

He turned her body and lifted her onto his lap. The position was almost an exact imitation of how he'd held her in her bed outside of this dream realm. With a thought, their clothing disappeared and a satin coverlet draped around them. The bench widened into a decadent summer bed. He lowered Amelia, kissing over her lips and nuzzling her cheek across to her ear, pausing to suck her earlobe with teasing licks of his tongue. Her gasp drove him on. When one fang brushed over her ear both were left panting for more.

Quickly skimming over her inviting throat, he trailed lower to her breast. His suckling mouth found one while his fingers tempted the other. He laved over the puckered nipple, drawing a moan from Amelia while a fang scraped over the sensitized tip. The sensation blazed through him, making his cock throb and ache with unbearable need.

Her back arched upward, drawing his free hand to follow the line of her hip to stroke over her tempting mound. Amelia's moist sex warmed his fingers as he feathered over her feminine lips, then parted them to touch within her waiting, silken sheath.

Her thighs tightened over his hand. Her body grew still and tense.

It might kill him, but he would stop if her fear was too much. "Easy. I do only what you want. I can stop --"

"No, I want more. Please..." Amelia's hand clenched over his shoulders. Her short nails cut crescents into his flesh. The pain was like bright pinpricks of pleasure.

He heard the fear and need that warred within her. Her body cried out for release from desire, but her mind set limits she hesitated to cross.

Returning to her mouth, he tasted and teased her lips until her mouth relaxed once more against his. His fingers continued to stroke over her slick folds, building the desire within her. He deepened their kiss, while dipping a single finger into her waiting pussy.

Her cunt was swollen and slick under his fingers, the fine, crisp hair teasing his fingertips. She kissed him back, welcoming him with her dancing tongue.

Grant stroked in and out, inserting a second finger to slowly stretch her open and show her the pleasure that she wanted so much. His thumb flicked over her rigid clit. His need demanded that he sink into her waiting heat. He ached to feast on her, to devour her slick arousal and show her how to satisfy him. Yet he held back, wanting her to feel pleasure in this first experience, willing to show patience with her inexperience.

She clutched his back as the first tremors of release quivered, tightened. Her body rocked into his strokes. Her lips and tongue devoured him with eager desperate

passion. Amelia moaned against him with a final surge and gently bit his lip, drawing a drop of blood.

*Blood.*

The painful hunger scorched through him, drawing him back from the pleasure and leaving him gasping through the pain. Grant pulled from her lips and fought for control. His cock ached still, but it was his fangs that swelled and pounded in time with each heartbeat. It was their agony of need that blinded him to everything else.

She thrust onto his penetrating fingers, crying out in pleasure, clenching around him, her body demanding his response as her climax ricocheted through their connection, scorching the last of his restraint.

His fangs lengthened, throbbed, burned. *I can't*, his mind called out to her, in warning, in apology, a breath before the sharp tips sank into her tender throat, drawing her warm blood. Grant was swept with her sweet passion. Amelia's thoughts swirled over him. He felt all of her joys and fears. At once, he could feel his fangs and fingers invading her body and feel how she welcomed all of him. The ecstasy of her taste offered him a world of satisfaction, easing his burning sexual need even as it satisfied the blood thirst. And through it all, Grant felt Amelia and he allowed her contentment and satisfaction to fill him.

\* \* \*

Amelia awakened slowly, stretching her contented body. Contented? Yes, sated! The vivid dream flooded her mind with images that brought a hot blush to her cheeks. She drew the coarse blanket up to her chin. Perhaps she was more like the other girls who worked at the tavern after all!

She had dreamed of a handsome man. Not just any handsome man, but the stranger she had met the night before. *How could she have dreamed such things?* Everything, his voice, kiss and touch, had felt perfectly decadent and totally indecent.

He had done more than she had ever imagined Jones doing, and not once had the actions caused fear or shame. The stranger's touch had felt... delicious. He'd done more than press his lips to hers. She'd been kissed in the past. The man had devoured



her, with nibbles and licks to her lips and over her body. His deep kisses had made her body ache for more. Her fingers touched her swollen lips as she felt again the heat of his mouth and tongue. And he had done much more than kiss her. He had stroked her body with his hands and mouth in ways that had excited her. Part of her wished it had been real. That bold part wished for more and wondered what else was possible.

The late morning sunshine blazed through the window. She'd slept in. But why hadn't Jean awakened her?

Fear raced through her as she swept the room for the boy. Jean wasn't in his bed or anywhere in their room. She sat up and swung her legs to the side of the bed. When her feet touched the floor, her head swam with dizziness. The world tilted and blackness swallowed her.

When she awoke again, memories jumped her heart into a gallop. *Jean!* "Jean, are you here?" she called, hoping he was only in the hallway and would hear her. She sat up cautiously, surprised to find she was back in bed. *She had fallen to the floor. Hadn't she?* Even if Jean had returned, he wasn't strong enough to lift her to the bed.

Beside her on the bed was a bowl of fruit filled with apples, grapes and a peach. *Delicacies.* She picked up the peach and bit into the perfectly ripe fruit. If someone left the fruit for her and put her back into bed, then Jean was probably with them. The only people who worried about her were the Pentreauxs, but they wouldn't have fruit like this.

She needed to find Jean. To be sure he was safe. As she started to get up, slowly this time, Jean flung the door open and ran into the room.

"Amelia! You're up!" he cried happily.

"Yes. I am now. Where have you been?"

"Downstairs with Madam Pentreaux. Grant said I should go visit them until you felt better. Is he gone?" Jean bounced in place with the typical energy of his age and innocence.

Amelia's attention caught at the man's name. "Grant?" *Why did that name feel familiar on her lips?*

"I wanted to show him my new sword. Is he gone?" he asked, again searching the small room that obviously held no Grant. The "sword" was a gnarled and bent piece of wood.

"Jean? Who is Grant?"

Her brother went completely still as he stood before her. "Your friend. That is what he said."

Now, she was very confused. She didn't know anyone named Grant, no matter how familiar the name tasted. She looked around in case this Grant had left a note. Who could it have been? Would he be coming back? And what did he want from them? She hurriedly dressed and walked around the room searching for some hint.

The cape was gone.

*Was Grant the stranger she had met on the street? Had he followed her home to get the cape? What more did he want from them? And what about the dream?* She glanced at the table and had a vague memory of being lifted from the hard chair.

"Jean, what did the man look like?" she asked, fearing the answer.

"He's real tall," Jean answered while he fidgeted in place.

Real tall would be anyone taller than her, which was just about everyone. "What else do you remember?"

"He wore really nice clothes and he had black hair, and he was really tall. He was so tall he had to bend over to walk."

What an odd thought... Surely, Jean meant because of the low ceiling in their garret room, which only rose a hand span above her head. Although the rest wasn't very specific, it was probably the same man. She smiled and ruffled Jean's hair to reassure him. At the same time, she worried what this man would mean to their already precarious future.

*Had the dream been real?* It seemed impossible and yet, he had been here. The dream had taken place in a garden, in summer with flowers in bloom. This room was far from a garden, without even a potted plant or herb bed. It was late fall with freezing showers. So it couldn't have been real.

*But he had been here.*

Had she imagined all of that because maybe he had spoken to her? Or had he done more than speak? Someone undressed her. How much had been a dream and how much of it was real? Would she ever know?

Another part of her tingled with anticipation. If the man had come and had created the dream, then how could she regret the beauty he had given to her? The phantom sensations that echoed her memories might keep a flush on her cheeks, but they also brought her body awake in such wonderful ways.

She'd almost made love to a stranger in her dream, and she'd enjoyed every moment of it.

Amelia faced her small mirror to tidy her hair. When she looked, she saw two marks on her neck. She touched the tiny punctures and her mind recalled him kissing and nuzzling her neck. They didn't hurt, but were very obvious. The memory of his lips and tongue dancing over her throat warmed the flush on her cheeks.

*Did he bite her? In a dream or in reality?* The very real marks made her think that he had actually bitten her and *that* she didn't remember.

## Chapter 3

Grant waited in the room, silently watching Amelia, unseen. He cloaked his presence and stayed to watch over her. He'd taken far too much blood, a problem he'd never had before. She tasted so sweet and her thoughts were addicting. He had lost track of time as he drank down the sweet nectar of her blood. He hadn't wanted to break the connection that forged while he fed. Even now, the hunger for her was returning with a slow throb that built in both fang and cock.

*Why did he have no control around her? He'd almost killed her!*

Still, he hungered, not just for Amelia's blood, but for her everything. His body wanted to claim hers and his mind sought Amelia out, yearning for a connection with her soul.

Fear was not a familiar emotion. As a mercenary, he faced thousands of battles with gleeful abandon. Never hesitating or flinching from whatever new horror he stood against...

Yet he panicked when Amelia fell to the floor.

Amelia's weakened state shocked him. To kill by feeding was forbidden and unnecessary. He usually needed no more than a mere sip of blood. His need for her made no sense and scared him. *Was he becoming more vampire?* Was that even a possibility? His mother was a succubus demon of one of the eldest royal bloodlines, but his father was a mortal, a human. His mother, Sadrina, feared mortality and had given him vampire blood to lengthen his life. To maintain his youth he needed to drink blood, but rarely and only in small amounts. This craving for Amelia's blood was beyond his control. Was there something special about the girl?

He had no answer.

He also had no reason to stay. Amelia had recovered well enough and would be far safer if he were gone. Maybe he could get some answers from his mother. If Sadrina would talk to him she might have an idea about what was happening to him.

Finally, having come to a decision, he silently left with the full intention of never setting eyes on sweet Amelia again.

But good intentions were not his strong suit. He was a demon, after all. Grant clung to the mental connection that bound Amelia to him while he rushed home through the bright daylight. Even with his quickened flight, his eyes streamed and his head ached before he made it across town to his home.

He gave in to the urge to mentally check on Amelia several times during the day. Just to be sure she wasn't suffering from his blood taking. Even he knew that was only an excuse. The first time he'd touched her mind, she had been recovering fine. Once he drank from a human, he was able to form a blood bond with them, giving him certain mental liberties. He knew generally where Amelia was and what emotions she felt if the emotion was strong enough.

Through their link he could tell that she was moving around the poorer sections of town and was very frustrated. *Was she searching for employment?* Her stressful emotions kept him agitated and restless. His conscience strained to help her any way he could.

Unable to rest, he spent the afternoon trying to organize his house for the upcoming move. Damn shame Claude and his other friends had to suddenly take offense at his origins. He found the details tedious and bothersome. This was the part he detested about moving on. His household staff was becoming beyond difficult. One had actually run screaming from the house. Why were they suddenly afraid of him? They'd never acted this way before and it was proving to be a nuisance now. Surely, Claude hadn't told them anything. He would think it beneath his station to speak to the servants.

Perhaps it would be worth the social ostracism to avoid the move.

*Or perhaps not.*

He could always leave everything and start new. Financially, he could, but what about the next time?

What he needed was someone he trusted to manage the move. He routinely left his various homes in the care of mortal families. When he moved to another home, the locals assumed he was a son or grandson of the previous owner. Since he had only one name, Grant, with no surname, he was often called Mr. Grant, adding to the illusion of a generational family.

The idea of someone, possibly a human, traveling with him and managing his affairs was very appealing, but also rather risky. Such a person would know too much about him to hide his immortality.

Until recently, he had traveled with a friend who had managed many of the details with much more grace than Grant was capable of. How he missed having Jerdin with him and for more than just the convenience of his organizational skills. He had grown up beside Jerdin and all his life revolved around their friendship.

As his mind had been doing every few minutes, it drifted back to Amelia. She did need a job and he could provide her with many comforts. Amelia's biggest concern seemed to be financial, which was certainly not a problem for him.

Perhaps it was the perfect solution. Amelia could help him with the move and he could offer her employment. Yes. He was sure this was the answer for them both. It was perfect!

Grant rushed out into the night to find her. Their link led him back to her room where he found Amelia already asleep.

He should leave. He should stay away from her. His feet locked in place. Every part of his being yearned for Amelia, who lay so peacefully before him. Hell itself would welcome him home before he could find the strength to leave her.

\* \* \*

Amelia shifted restlessly in her bed. She dreamed of the rose garden behind her old home. She always liked to sit there and watch the birds. Her mother had arranged several birdbaths and feeders around the small patio, calling it her flutter garden. They

often sat together and made a game of identifying the different birds. Today, Amelia was by herself in the flutter garden. Her mother was gone, but the garden remained a happy place.

At least, Amelia thought she was alone until she heard soft footsteps behind her. Turning, she saw Grant in his long cape as he walked through the garden gate. Grant smiled. His laughing, gray eyes sparkled down at her in obvious pleasure.

Amelia smiled back at Grant, shy and unsure.

He knelt down before her and took her hands in his. "Amelia." Her name was a sigh on his lips. "Look, the birds dance for you." He motioned toward the center of the garden where dozens of colorful birds suddenly flew together, creating a beautiful changing design.

She laughed in delight at the lovely birds. Grant's fingers wove into hers and the warmth felt natural. How had she ever gone without his touch?

His deep laughter joined hers as they watched the birds frolic in the air.

The calm filled Amelia with contentment. Grant's warm hands were filled with strength, offering her his support in any battle. His gentle touch made no demands, but offered so much of himself.

"I was waiting for you," she said.

"Were you?"

She sensed his surprise. It was more than his expression or tone, but the emotion itself, almost as if she could feel what was within his thoughts. "Yes, I think... I knew you would come." She watched his face, trying to sense more of what he felt.

"Then I am very glad I did come. Now what should we do?" When she didn't offer any suggestions, he said, "How about we dance? I wish to hold you in my arms." He stood and bowed low before her, giving her hand a gallant kiss. "Mademoiselle, will you honor me with a dance in your flutter garden?"

Amelia giggled at his formal request. It had been many years since she'd been given such attention and she struggled to remember the proper response. "Oh, yes. It would warm my heart to be twirled about by so handsome a gentleman." She began to

stand, but hesitated when she was reminded that she wore a battered old dress. She would look terribly shabby next to his dapper attire.

Grant lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Never mind all that. It is nothing that cannot be changed with but a thought." Putting action to words, he waved his hand dismissingly at her clothes and they were instantly replaced with a lavish, golden evening gown, including everything down to pale golden slippers.

The clothing was the thing of dreams. The elegant silk and shimmering satin layered over her narrow hips and flowed out around her in a golden bell.

"Does that suit, or do you wish for something different?"

"It... It's perfect." As she twirled, the soft silk underthings caressed her body, brushing her thighs and cradling her breasts.

Looking satisfied, Grant pulled her under one arm and faced the garden. He waved his hand at the rose bushes to the right of the path. They promptly crowded back against the wall and burst into even thicker, heavily scented blooms. Enormous, flat stones lifted up from the black soil, shifting to form a nearly smooth surface. A spacious stone dance floor stood where the roses had once been.

She was awestruck by his abilities as he called the birds from the sky, directing them to settle in the bushes where they began to sing. He rearranged the garden to create what they needed. "I wish I could do that."

"Do what?" He shifted her in his arms, meeting her gaze with a puzzled expression.

"Magic." Amelia didn't mean to sound so wistful, but his creations amazed her.

"You can. This is your dream." He touched her lips with a finger in the lightest of caresses. "Whatever you want, we can do. I can help you if you need it."

It was a dream. She could have or do whatever she wished? It was a liberating thought. She wanted to be carefree for this time, without consequence or responsibility. Her life was filled with the things she must do just to ensure she and Jean survived. How wonderful to let go of all those cares and enjoy this single moment, this dream for only herself.



But what was it that she wanted? She looked around at the garden and the beautiful flowers and birds. None of that held as much appeal as the man who held her so gently. She wanted him and all that he offered.

Within the dream, she remembered Grant's words. Here she could do anything! Amelia's breasts tightened in expectation. She knew what she wanted. Grant offered her the chance to experience exactly what the other tavern girls enjoyed.

She opened his hand and placed a kiss to his palm.

His breath caught at the contact, his gaze locking on her upturned face.

Amelia knew her kiss had surprised him. Women of society simply did not initiate physical touch with men. But this wasn't society. *This was a dream.* Emboldened, her tongue slipped out for the smallest of licks.

Tentative, but hot.

He groaned, "So this is what you want?" He leaned down and claimed her lips. The pressure was firm and demanding. His hand slid into her hair, holding her in place. He shifted her closer and enticed her mouth open with a rasping lick of his tongue. The burning passion that flared up surprised her.

She pulled back by slow increments until she could meet his smoldering gaze. She'd never felt such emotions before. His dominance felt wild and reckless, dangerous. His touch awoke desires within her, dampening the soft silk between her thighs.

A burst of panic filled her. "I want the night," Amelia whispered, needing to slow her momentum down a road she was unsure how to take. Logically, she knew that she had nothing to fear here in this dream, but never before had she felt such desire.

"Then think of the night as you want it and we will make it just that way."

She closed her eyes and imagined a moonlit night with the stars impossibly bright. "Tell me how to make the night," she demanded softly. A part of Amelia doubted she could control the same magic as Grant had.

"Only open your eyes, little Wishling. It is done." Grant's words blew across her ear, sending a liquid shiver through her body.

When she opened her eyes, the night was perfect, exactly as she'd imagined. The sky clear, the moon full and stars glittering. The birds continued to serenade them and now torches stood near the newly created dance floor. She smiled up at the man who'd made it possible. The scent of the roses was heady and so was the desire shining from his eyes.

\* \* \*

Grant couldn't help but smile. Amelia was such a marvel. Her innocence made his blood boil for the chance to teach her about the art of making love and a more tender part of him yearned to care for and protect her. When her eyes filled with desire as they were now, he knew the true depth of his need. Truly, his mind melted under his body's pangs of hunger. Every part of his body and soul ached to claim her, mark her, and possess her.

Amelia leaned into his embrace, raising her beautiful lips up like a sacrifice. He let his hands have free rein, brushing over Amelia's shoulders and down her back, molding her slender form against him. His fingers cupped her delectable derriere, lifting slightly as he met her lips halfway. She would be his. He almost growled in possession. He wanted her naked and writhing under him. His cock swelled where it pressed between them. This time he would have all of her.

Her arms slid around his neck, balancing her in place as he plundered her lips and tongue. Amelia tangled her soft tongue with his, licking at it lightly and their kiss deepened. Her inexperienced kiss hit him like a cannon to his gut, leaving him aching for more. He clung to his meager control as her tongue brushed over his partially extended fangs. The contact sizzled through him sharply, like fingernails over his swollen cock. Almost painful, but oh, so welcome. As always his aroused fangs tightened with the pleasure in just the same way his cock would and did.

Grant shifted his onslaught, taking control of the kiss. He tempted and coaxed her tongue into the dance that imitated the loving yet to come. She met him in the thrust and retreat motion. Her fingers caught at his hair, holding him tight while she ground her body against him, using his hands where they supported her ass as leverage. The

dress bunched as she raised her legs to wrap around his waist. The heat from her sex met with his arousal. Surely they would soon catch fire and be ashes before either even cared.

He had expected her to be more reticent, but then few women could withstand synn, the powerful pheromones that his mother's kind released during moments of desire. They were potent and dangerous. With that in mind, Grant lifted Amelia slightly away from their kiss. She met his gaze and quirked one eyebrow upward. Her eyes were clear and her pupils were not the dilated orbs of those affected by the erotic chemicals.

Grant hugged her hard in his relief. Of course, she wouldn't be affected by synn here within her dreams. Her arms tightened around him and he felt her feet bump against his legs.

Even with the fullness of her desire, she would feel rushed by what was between them. He lowered her body the rest of the way to stand on her own feet, but completely releasing Amelia demanded more control than he possessed. Her back was firm and narrow under his caressing palm. Amelia's long hair tumbled over his fingers, begging to be touched. The thick, soft waves trailed through his fingers like silk.

Amelia's fingers brushed over his jaw. "You promised me a dance."

He met her challenge with a chuckle. Amelia offered him the perfect excuse to continue holding her. "Then, we shall dance." When he would have lifted her into a twirl, she stopped him once again.

Her expression held a frown.

"What is it? What have we missed?" Here in the world of their making, they could have and do anything and everything that brought them pleasure. Grant wanted it to be perfect.

"The birds are lovely, but we can't dance to their songs." Her voice was quiet, but filled with longing.

"So true, but we could ask them to play tunes we can dance to," he said in jest, thinking to provide the sounds of the very best orchestra for her. Often, she seemed so

serious. He needed to tease her and bring out her beautiful smile. Lifting her hand, Grant kissed each of her fingertips.

She, however, pulled free and turned to the birds, bowing before them. "My dear nightingales, would you please whistle us up some dance music? I desire to dance with that man and I fear I cannot carry a note even with a basket." Her expression was serious, but a decided twinkle to her bright eyes gave her away.

Grant laughed at her whimsical entreaty. Amelia was bright and it pleased him that she'd managed to find a spot of humor even in her dire circumstance. Her personality rang of one raised gently. Surely the trials she faced now could yet be overcome. The thought brought him up short. How had he grown to care so much? He'd lived so long without connecting with another soul, but now Amelia had managed to slip past his defenses.

Perhaps it was lust that he was confusing with that deeper emotion. He surely felt that for her. His world lit up when she smiled at him and exploded with her touch. *Yes, perhaps it was only lust.*

Amelia gave the appearance of disappointment that the birds hadn't answered. Then she brightened and gave him a wink. "Why I bet they didn't understand the words!" She whistled the request, now supposedly in their language.

Grant pulled her into his arms as he laughed in surprise at her silly antics. Her warm body met his and felt right in every way.

*Was Amelia his morning star?*

The vampire-like blood his mother had given him had been from a Cyvampis demon. The Cyvampis came from a culture as rich as any closed group. They held a belief that each would find their own morning star, a soul mate, and once they bonded, it would allow them to walk in the day.

This daydream had never held meaning for him since the sunlight was not out of his reach, but if it had, Amelia was surely his morning star. There was a light within her that brightened some forgotten part of his being. He was getting maudlin with sentiments like love and sudden yearnings for a morning star.

Their laughter died as desire flared bright once more. He claimed her lips, demanding and receiving entry. The tangle of heated touches focused his wandering mind on the moment and in this moment, he held the woman of his dreams. Grant beat back his more sentimental side. Morning star or not, the woman he held in his arms was the only one who could satisfy his thirst and ease the ache in his cock.

## Chapter 4

Amelia let out a gasp when Grant pulled her into his hard embrace, his mouth seeking hers so wild it was almost violent. What had brought the urgency that suddenly filled him? Whatever it was that drove him was more than welcome. Her body hummed in response to his forcefulness.

She met his crushing lips and reveled in the overwhelming contact. She needed more. She opened to him, tempting him to deepen the kiss, pressing her needy body against his hard one. She slipped one hand up into his thick hair. Tonight it was bound with a leather strip and the confinement kept her fingers from sinking into its silky length. She started to pull it free, but hesitated. Could she use the dream power as he said or had he given her all this?

She focused on the tie loosening, falling away, and it did. The black silk of his hair fell around their faces, becoming a curtain of privacy.

She felt his smile against her lips as he pulled back slightly. "You are amazing."

"Not so." While he said amazing, Amelia still felt fear of this emotion between them. How could touching Grant be so different from being with Jones? His intense eyes made offers that she was afraid to reach for.

Grant's hands stroked over her as soft music floated over the air. He took her in his arms and began a slow dance that allowed their bodies to brush together. Arousal and hot need crackled between them. Grant held her in his possessive embrace, his lips brushing over her ear with a whisper. "You are perfect."

"Definitely not so." Within his arms, she almost believed that she could someday reach the high standard he held of her.

"To me, you are both." They made a slow circle, each motion emphasized by the sizzle of friction that rose between them. He spun her out, and then tugged her back

flush into his body. "I want you. I want to make love to you. Here in this garden of our making." He crushed her body against him, hard enough to define his swollen desire, even through her thick skirts.

"I want that too, but I'm afraid." How could she give him what he wanted? He deserved his pleasure when he willingly gave her so much. What could she offer a man of such experience? His handsome looks and dapper appearance were far beyond even her family's lost prosperity. He was a man of the world, a man of power.

Grant's arms tightened a moment before he twirled her away, then back. As her breasts slammed into his chest, she felt a growl-like rumble. His mouth claimed hers once more. In that moment, he went from wealthy aristocrat to the basic hard, insatiable man. There was a part of him that seemed beyond control. No matter what he intended, he would take control and become overwhelming once fully released from his cultured image. His immaculate grooming and styled appearance suddenly seemed a carefully maintained façade which hid his passionate, dominant personality.

"Here, it can be nothing but beautiful. Our being together will be however you wish, just as you want."

Suddenly, Amelia understood that even released from all restraints, Grant would never harm her. Every instinct told her to trust him, to let him lead her in this new experience. Even the fierceness within him was part of him and under his control. That same terrifying wildness that was buried just under the surface was an undeniable temptation that drew her. "I want you wild. I feel that within you and it tempts me with such promises."

"I can be that for you. I can be anything for you."

For tonight, she would let him lead and she would follow. Here in the dream she could learn what it was to be with a man. She could experience it all without fear and finally understand what other women enjoyed.

He must have understood her complete acceptance, for his grip tightened and he lifted her from her feet. Grant carried her to a gateway between two tall hedges. As he stepped through, a plush bed appeared in this outdoor room. The exotic scent of vanilla

filled the air even before the candles floated in and set themselves into niches, forming in the hedge wall. The beautiful music continued to serenade them.

His cape appeared across the lavish bedding. He laid her down upon its soft texture. He ran his hands over her body, starting at the neckline of the fine dress. As he brushed the cloth, it withered away and turned to smoke, then drifted off on the light breeze. His hot gaze on her naked flesh was a delicious but forbidden pleasure. Her body took on a mind of its own. Her breasts tightened. Her nipples puckered. Lower in her body, a new ache began and the junction of her thighs grew slick with need.

She wiggled and reached for him when it seemed he would stare at her for an eternity. Weaving her fingers into his midnight hair, Amelia drew him close to kiss his lips. He met hers with an intoxicating sweetness. This was not wild, but tender. She pulled back enough to whisper, "You promised me wild."

"I did but I do not wish to frighten you either."

"I am done being afraid of you." Amelia held his gaze. How had she ever let fear come between them? Grant made her heart race and awoke the promise of a future within her once more. She'd been so long without hope. Could she trust her judgment over what he offered? Did it even matter in this land of dreams?

Her hands reached for him, catching his shoulders. Grant was wearing far too much clothing, but could she turn it to smoke as he had hers? Before she could act on the impulse, he waved and the clothing pooled over his feet in the form of rose petals.

Her gaze soaked up his form, memorizing each plane and angle. His skin was rich olive and dusted with black hair on his lean calves and thighs. There, her gaze faltered. His shaft thrust out from its nest of short dark hair, intimidating in length and width. She dragged her gaze away nervously, following the fine trail upward to his smooth chest.

"Remember, this is a dream. I will be only what you want me to be."

She tugged his hand to pull him close again. Her other hand brushed over the hard muscles of his chest. The press of his hot body along hers was a new experience, one that awoke parts of her that craved more of him. The broad, flat muscles rippled as



she stroked him. His nipple hardened under her palm. Grant sank to the bed beside her and lay back for her to explore as she wished. Amelia knelt, letting her fingertips brush over him, wherever they wanted. Across his lips while his eyes drifted shut. Then down his throat and shoulder where she pressed light kisses to his skin, along his chest and back to his responsive nipples. She kissed one nipple then caught it between her teeth with a teasing nip.

His moan encouraged her to claim the power he offered. Her hand crept lower to where his cock waited. Amelia watched his body react to her tentative touch, his cock bobbing as her fingers trailed over his flat abdomen. She ran her fingers and palm lightly over its length, amazed to feel its mass grow harder and swell larger. *Like silk over iron.* Her fingers brushed over the damp pearl at the tip of his cock, smoothing it back over the length, easing the pass of her hand with the slickness.

He groaned, and then hissed when she slid her fingers around him in a firmer grip. "I cannot take much more of this."

Up and down the length of his cock, she continued to caress Grant. With each stroke, she thrilled with the control she held over him. Having him so at her mercy built up an achy need within her, a need to experience more with him, to feel him within her. "You did promise me wild. Yet, you seem quite tame."

"I shall happily follow you when you hold me leashed like this." He pulled her hand away, twining their fingers, then tugged both her hands above her head, gently holding her at his mercy.

She smiled up at him, and then bit down on her lip with a wave of nervousness. His eyes nearly glowed, his expression fiery and intense. Then, he was all liquid motion. His free hand stroked over her body, his lips and tongue coaxing her mouth. His hot shaft pressed against her hip.

Grant's hand lowered to her cleft and she opened her thighs willingly for him. Already, she was slick, hot and needy. His long fingers quickly set her afire. Desire swirled through her when he settled his fingers on her and parted her pussy, letting one sweep up through the moisture he'd created. The fast motion over her swollen center

brought her thighs closed over his hand. He plunged the finger deeper into her, stroking hard over her inner ridges. Her channel tightened over his hand. She shuddered in response to his touch, and then twisted in a spasm of pleasure when his thumb flicked at her sensitive flesh.

He caught her gasp of pleasure with a deep kiss, thrusting his tongue in, demanding Amelia accept his invasion.

She accepted. She welcomed and sparred back with him. He pulled back from her lips. Grant's lips found a breast, locking on it to suckle, catching the pebbled tip, rolling it between teeth and tongue with a sharp nibble.

Grant released her hands and his mouth moved lower, dropping feather light kissed over her ribs and along the line of her hip. His hands lifted her rear up and he pressed his face between her thighs at the juncture where he had built so much pleasure. Her gasp of surprise drew his attention. His gaze met hers briefly with a decided twinkle. Then he found the center of her pleasure with his tongue and she gave in to the joy of the experience. Any thought of impropriety was driven from her as he licked at her entrance and teased her clit, then dived to taste her depths. His feast continued until she gripped his hair in her need, unsure if she wanted him to stop or go on forever.

Then Grant shifted his weight, moving between her twitching thighs. He was far too large for her. She knew it. Yet she trusted Grant. So far, all he had shown her was pleasure. She wrapped her arms around him, soaking up his strength and offering her trust.

He nibbled her lips, then kissed her deeply and entered her in a long, smooth stroke. When he stilled, she lifted her hips with a cry of desperation. She felt so full and needed so much more. The almost terrifying demands of her body rode over her, rushing her to some overwhelming brink of pleasure or pain or both. The stillness of Grant's statue-like body left her reeling and lost. She rocked her body up against his hips.

He understood her need, withdrawing and leading her in a slow, driving rhythm. His cock surged and retreated, claiming her body and soul and the slickness of her need responded to that dominance. The desire burst through her without restraint. She cried out with the need for more. It was all she could do to keep from begging. The length of his shaft plunged into her, its width stretching her deliciously, making her hips rise to meet his in complete abandon.

Amelia's back arched as his lips found her breast, licking at her nipple, making it pebble tightly when he surrounded it with his mouth. His tongue rasped over the surface with short, silken strokes. He moved along her collarbone, licking and nipping at her already seared skin and letting her hands go, so that she might explore him more freely. The black silk of his hair fell over her shoulder. Even that feather-light touch tingled. She was on fire, lightning thrumming through her veins, brightening a path of sweet discovery. Their slick bodies glided against one another. Each connection of flesh centered on where they joined, each motion deepening that exhilarating bond.

Grant's hands pinned her hips, anchoring them to receive his deep thrusts. Then he shifted one hand to caress her swollen clit in time with his motion. The combination of his invading cock and caressing thumb shot pleasure through her in waves, each rippling, clenching and drawing moans from her, until Grant fell forward to reclaim her lips. He possessed and devoured her, pushing her to the brink in a flashflood of sensation.

She cried at the tension that strung her body tight. She clung to his back, clawing into his thick muscles without thought for anything but relief from this spiral of pleasure. Wrapping her legs around him, she thrust upward, encouraging him to drive more deeply. Her orgasm crested. She clenched around him and felt Grant's moan against her throat, when he too came thick and hot.

With a final thrust, he collapsed against her and relaxed in her arms, both of them gasping for breath. Amelia rested a palm over his chest, and snuggled in close to the warmth of his body. Her strength seemed to have been sapped away one moan at a time. Sweet oblivion as warm satisfied darkness wrapped around her.

## Chapter 5

"Thank you, Amelia!"

Amelia awoke to Jean's yell and to his small body landing on her, jarring every bone in her body. She bit down on a moan. "For what?" She hugged Jean tight while fighting back a wave of dizziness.

"For the sword, silly," he said, crawling from the bed and running to get the sword in question, which was beautifully carved and painted wood.

Remembering how she'd passed out the morning before, Amelia moved slowly to the edge of the bed where she could see the bowl of fruit that had again been left for her. Evidently, Jean had already pillaged the bowl. All but a few of the grapes were gone and a peach pit had been returned, minus the peach. She devoured several pieces of fruit while Jean showed off his hacking and slashing abilities with his new sword.

"Jean, do you know who brought the fruit or sword?" Amelia finished off the second peach.

"You did. Umm, no, I thought you did."

She thought about her vivid, erotic dreams, including her mysterious man. "Did you see Grant here?"

"No. Was he here? Do you think he left the sword?" Jean bounced in place. Then he returned to hacking with the sword.

Was Jean's excitement due to Grant? "I don't know." Amelia reached for her small mirror to confirm one other fact. Indeed, there was another, newer set of bite marks on her neck. Lower, closer to her collarbone.

Right where the Grant of her dreams had nibbled and kissed her as they made love.

Amelia stared at the mark until Jean grew bored and moved off to hack and slash elsewhere. *Why didn't the mark hurt?* She touched it and was surprised to find it not at all painful. The pair of pinkish dots perhaps should have caused fear, but instead, Amelia blushed with a surge of remembered passion.

If only Jones' touch inspired such wonderful sensations. Then their futures wouldn't be in such danger. Life would be so much easier if she could be like the other tavern girls.

But then, perhaps... perhaps she could. After all, her dreams had been quite enjoyable. Today, when she went to the tavern, she would have the chance to find out.

\* \* \*

Grant's walk home in the cold, early morning drizzle did nothing to release his guilt, hunger or arousal. Joining Amelia's dream had been all he could hope for, but for him, making love in dream realms was not as satisfying as in the waking worlds.

Being half synn demon, it was his nature to be almost insatiable. His kind never left a lover unsatisfied. He would happily have taken Amelia again, perhaps a dozen more times. Each time was an exquisite release, but also drove his desire on for more. If not for the blood, he might have stayed.

*Damn, I simply have no restraint.*

So perhaps restraint had never been his strong suit, but twice now, he had nearly drained the girl!

That was not a problem he normally faced. Not that he was repulsed by feeding, he just thought of it as necessary. Not good or bad, just a part of life. In two nights, he had taken more from her small body than he normally needed in a whole year. It made no sense to him.

Why did he crave Amelia so much? Why couldn't he control this burning hunger for her? Even now, the mere thought of her taste... His fangs lengthened, calling for more of what they desired. For the very act that could kill Amelia!

Grant brushed past his butler with no more than a growl and went upstairs to his suite. He tried to rest, but failed miserably. Pulsing need twisted into restless energy.

Barring actual sleep, he would at least make progress toward the move to London. Maybe if he were far enough away from Amelia, she would be safe from his out of control hungers.

How far would he have to go, to be sure he didn't kill her? Would London be far enough? Would the other side of the world? He'd never faced such a hunger and he'd never before made such dangerous mistakes.

Grant left his rooms to face his servants. They scattered before him. Only his butler retained courage enough to hover nearby. Usually the house ran perfectly well without his interference. Now, it was reduced to chaos with none of the servants willing to do his bidding. Grant attempted to regain a semblance of the formerly calm and organized household. He grouched, complained and outright threatened until his staff fled in fear, leaving his home in even more disorder than before. He threw his arms up in disgust.

The tasks of moving his personal and business belongings and closing most of this house off shouldn't be so impossible. How did people who actually took all their belongings manage?

"I need to get out of here." He said the words to the empty foyer after the last servant, his usually friendly butler, scurried off.

For once, he didn't take his usual precautions to appear "normal." His cloak materialized on his shoulders and the doors flew open while he nearly ran from the house.

He was filled with a desperate need, for blood and for comfort.

The comfort he wanted was to see and hold Amelia again.

Grant's craving for blood was beyond his comprehension. It terrified him that such a thing could change after thousands of years of consistency. *Mother? I need you*, he called mentally, hoping she would answer him this time. His mother would understand what was happening to him or would know who to ask.

*Yes, Grant, what has happened?* Her mind was sleepy and relaxed. Wherever she was, she was content and he hated to bother her. If not for his fear of killing Amelia, he would have left Sadrina to her well-earned freedom.

*I crave blood like never before. Could I be turning after all this time?* That was his greatest fear. He could be turning into a true vampire. He didn't even know if such a change was possible. For all he knew, he was the only half demon, half human ever born. To say he was unique was an understatement. Then his mother having him fed cyvampis blood added to his load of strangeness. Cyvampis blood could turn a human into a vampire, but only if the human was drained of blood first and technically dead. Grant had never died, nor had his half human blood been drained.

*Of course not.* Sadrina paused, mid-denial. *Well, I do not believe so. The little cyvampis blood you were fed should only slow your aging. It should not change your body nor affect your soul. The hunger must be great if you are this concerned.*

He sighed, easing the tension from his clenched fists. His mother had never let him down. *It is great. I have nearly taken the last drop, twice now.*

*You did not take a life, though?* There was fear to her tone now. She valued life, especially the short lives of mortals. Not to mention that taking the life of a mortal through blood-letting would qualify him for the dubious honor of working as a Cyvampis Tascryn. Already it took all his mother's conniving to keep him from being taken in as Synn Tascryn.

*No, not yet, but still I hunger.* Somehow, just knowing that she would fight this problem with him made it easier to face.

*You must not kill with your feeding! Never!* It wasn't something she'd felt the need to stress in several thousand years. Grant felt the bite of shame that she needed to even say such words.

Grant hesitated to tell Sadrina the details. She had to know all the facts, but surely, she would misunderstand some to fit with her own plans. *I know this, Mother, and yet, I cannot resist her.*

*Her? The same girl?* Sadrina sounded hopeful.

Grant swallowed a groan and he moved through the crowded streets. Sadrina often asked when he would settle down with a girl and in the last few years had even sent a few to him with silly messages or errands. If she was to help him sort this out, she needed to know about Amelia. *Yes, her blood calls to me.* It was true but also so much more than that. *She is important in some way that I don't understand. I crave every part of her. It is the thirst for her blood that I fear. I... I could not stand it, if my weakness caused her death.*

*I understand, my son. You must find the strength to resist until I can find the reason. Stay away from her for the next few days. It is possible that the girl may be more than she seems. But no matter the reason, you cannot risk the taking of her life.* Her words made sense and caused him pain.

If Amelia was the cause of his distress, he had to stay away from her. Why did that option seem so appalling and totally impossible? *I will try, but...* But he had tried already and failed.

*You will be strong. If you must go to her, be careful enough for both of you. I will find the answer.* She understood. He had honor and strength, but also weakness. If he doubted he could stay away from Amelia, then he probably couldn't.

*Yes, Mother. How will you find this answer?* Sadrina was away from their Tascryn origins, away from those who would know. Surely, she wouldn't return there, to Pahele?

*I will and that is all you need know. Be strong, my son. You carry my heart with you.*

Even as Grant broke the connection with his mother, he failed to resist the calling. The need to see Amelia was relentless. He would go, but would *not* feed from her again. The fear in his mother's mind drove home the importance of restraint even if he couldn't follow all her advice.

\* \* \*

"Master?" Sadrina knelt low before the dark demon lord in absolute submission. Pahele was as beautiful as ever. He was pure and complete in his dominance over all within this realm. She knew the cost of kneeling before him.



“Sadrina, finally you’ve returned to my side.” Pahele reached a scaly black hand toward her. His powers picked her up and pulled her onto the raised dais where he stood, tight against his hard, bare chest.

She struggled to pull away from his icy, burning flesh. Power crackled from his skin to hers. His face was a cold mask. His heart remained unfeeling to all who he was destined to destroy. Under Pahele’s hands, the human clothing she wore as camouflage melted away. Her skin darkened from olive to bluish black.

Sadrina was home.

Pahele forced his will over her own, reforming her body as he wished her to be, as she was born to be. He would accept nothing less and to fight him was to lose. “If you wish to have the answer you seek, you must convince me of your desire to please.” His foul hands stroked down her back in a possessive, yet tender, caress. “Please me, and your son will know the truth.”

Her master knew she would do anything for Grant. For the son that should have been his. Only the politics of the gods kept them apart. Only the destinies that none could control kept them bound together.

Sadrina let her body go limp, sagging against him in defeat. She would do anything for Grant. Even accept an end to her freedom. Even barter this return to her one true master.

The cost was great and yet also welcome. She did belong in this place of power. The past years within the mortal world had taught her the empty promise of freedom, when she yearned only for her master.

Four thousand years of imprisonment had driven her from this realm and into the mortal world, for any place had appeal over a moment more of enslavement. Although Pahele hadn’t been the one to hold her, he was guilty of failing to release her. Her freedom meant nothing to him. To him, she was only another object to use and manipulate. As much as she had always wanted him, she needed him to be more than her jailor.

At Pahele's side Sadrina could be a queen, but she would also once again be a prisoner.

## Chapter 6

Amelia had gone to every tavern and several other businesses and still she had no better offers of employment. Something was very strange about many of the people's reactions to her. It was as if they expected her. Some were fearful and most had been angry with her.

There could be only one reason for their strange actions. Jones must have spread lies about her being diseased or some other foul thing.

Without a new job she was left with little choice but to accept Jones' attention. After the beautiful dreams of Grant, she almost thought she could tolerate Jones' touch without vomiting on him, but his touch remained as vile as ever. During her hours at the tavern the night before, she had managed to dodge Jones for most of the evening. Only once had he cornered her for his kissing and groping. How could the same action feel so very different? The difference must be the men.

Even the memory of Grant's touch filled her with pleasure and left her aching for more of the wonderful experience.

Yet her skin crawled at the thought of Jones' hard hands and foul breath. Starving on the street would be preferred for herself, but not for young Jean. For her brother, Amelia would return to Jones.

If she could trick him into admitting his lies about her to the other tavern owners, then she might still find work elsewhere. And if she couldn't... Well, then, perhaps she could find a way to tolerate his touch.

Though Amelia dreaded the coming battle, she knew the confrontation was inevitable. She hoped the argument would be loud enough to spread the rumors to the other businesses. The time had come to fight back. She walked into the tavern and stormed straight up to Jones.

"You horrible lowlife! What did you tell them?" Amelia shouted at the detestable tavern owner.

"I know not what you mean." His tiny eyes looked at her with smug satisfaction.

"You told the other business owners some lie to keep them from hiring me. What lie did you use?" It was working! The people in the tavern were staring at her and listening. Not another voice could be heard.

"Lower your voice, you useless little whore," he hissed as he grabbed her arm to drag her from the barroom. "I knew you would try to get another owner to take you in. You think you are better than the rest of us. If you want your waitress position you will have to mend your ways." His fingers dug into her upper arm as she wrenched it out of his grip. Before she could step back, he grabbed her once again.

She attempted to pull free of him as he spun her around the corner, almost into the back room. They were out of sight of the main room but still within hearing. "That is not why I'm here. I want you to tell the other tavern owners the truth, so I can find another position." Reaching behind her, she clutched at the doorframe. She'd stopped him within the tavern, still with an audience.

An evil grin flitted across his face as he figured out what she was really up to. "Ahhh, I see," he whispered, before continuing in a voice as loud as her own, "I will not lie for you. Hiring the diseased is too serious to let others make my mistake."

A sudden sound of scraping chairs from the closest tables was followed by retreating footsteps. The black plague, although mostly passed, was still fresh in the minds of most people.

"You lying monster." No! She couldn't fail. She had to find some way to make him admit what he'd done.

He smiled, showing his missing tooth, and winked with a leer toward the more private back room. "Perhaps I could be convinced to help you." His grip tightened, digging into her painfully. Then his mouth pressed against her, his tongue shoving into hers. Jones pinned her painfully to the doorframe.

She pushed, but Jones was unmovable. *This was nothing like her dreams with Grant!* His breath was horrible and his hands only caused pain as they twisted and pinched at her breasts.

Jones pulled back. "Perhaps I will decide tonight while you are convincing me."

Amelia fearfully wrenched again at her entrapped arm while he opened the door and began to push her ahead of him. Despite her struggles, he forced her further. She caught her foot on the doorframe only to have Jones kick it hard.

"And perhaps not," came the deep familiar voice as Jones was yanked back, freeing Amelia so suddenly that she almost fell.

"Grant?" she squeaked. This wasn't the easygoing gentle man of her dreams. He lifted the owner's large bulk several inches off the floor as easily as a child held a doll. His obvious fury was amplified by the candle light, flickering shadows that danced over the hard planes of his face. The darkness wrapped around him like a second cloak. His eyes flashed like daggers, but he did no more than dangle Jones in his helpless position.

With a bone rattling shake, he dropped the man and turned to Amelia with a heartwarming smile. The violence was completely gone from him, leaving a man comfortable and in control. "Come, Wishling. We need to speak." He reached out a hand to her and she waited a long moment before placing hers in it. The gentle but sure contact sent a shiver of longing through her. Together, they left the tavern, walking in the cool, brisk night.

Several minutes passed before she spoke up. "Where are we going?" He had rescued her, but for what purpose?

"Have you eaten yet? Would you have dinner with me?"

She nodded as she reached up and touched the newest bite mark on her throat, mumbling under her breath, "As long as I'm not the meal."

He stopped suddenly. "W... what?" He looked down at her, lifting her hand to expose the two punctures left from their last dream encounter.

Defiantly, she met his gaze, intending to demand an explanation, but at the concern and fear she read on his face, left her words unspoken.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could explain it to you, but I can't." He sighed and stroked his palm over her forehead. Closing his eyes, he struggled with something that Amelia couldn't identify. "No. I will explain. I will tell you everything I can."

Grant tilted her neck slightly and lowered his head to her throat, kissing his marks with gentle lips. Amelia felt the paralysis leave her, but she didn't even try to pull away.

"Please, let us have dinner and we can talk about our problem. Then we can decide together what to do." His hand slid down to claim hers with a reassuring squeeze.

"Yes," she answered, but couldn't remember the question. Her thoughts were crowded but unfocused leaving her as trusting as a child. She allowed him to lead her to an inn that included a small, quiet dining area. A few words to the hostess had them seated at a darkened table near the back.

Her mind cleared of the obscuring fog. She remembered this inn. It wasn't far from her parents' old home on the far side of town. How had they traveled so far on foot? She watched while Grant poured a glass of wine for each of them. Now was the time to get some answers.

"Are the dreams real?" She needed to know this before anything else. Had she made love to this stranger? *Could she regret it?*

He sighed. "Yes and no."

"Could you perhaps be a little more precise?" She watched him closely, trying to read his stoic expression. She needed a clear explanation of what the dreams meant. Did their encounter mean anything to him? Was it "real" enough for her to become pregnant?

"It is very hard to explain." He still hedged and he looked embarrassed to be forced to talk about it. She tamped down a pulse of sympathy. This session of honesty might be very difficult for him, but she wasn't going to let him change the subject.

"Try." He might be stubborn, but she was certainly going to be more so. The very possibility of a child resulting from a dream was enough to demand a detailed explanation.

"I can join you in your dreams. We are both there, but it is inside a dream." He said this slowly as if it was all she would need to know.

"How real are the dreams? Can a child result?" She simply couldn't afford to care for another child. She prayed that part was only a dream.

"Our being together was inside the dream alone. I have not known your body in that way."

"But the bite marks are real?" His dark skin flushed at the question. It was the biting that embarrassed him, not making love.

"Yes." Grant wouldn't meet her gaze. She could barely hear him, his voice dropped so low.

"You bit me? Why?" Somehow, she'd expected him to deny the action despite the evidence. How could he explain this? *Please have a good reason.* But what was a good reason for biting someone?

"Yes." He sighed, dropping his head into his hands. He looked so confused and trounced that she physically had to comfort him. From their contact within the dreams she knew he wasn't used to anything but total control. Now faced with this situation, she wanted him to reclaim the strength that was his right.

"Why?" she repeated as she lightly cupped his cheek in one palm, lifting his eyes to hers. She needed to hear him say it to make it real.

He met and held her gaze. "I drink blood," he whispered.

She thought for a moment she must have misheard him, but it was the only logical answer. If that could be called logical. "I thought as much. Can you tell me why you drink blood? I once heard a story about a blood drinker. Are you like that, living on only blood for eternity?"

\* \* \*

Grant pulled her hand from his cheek and held it between his, caressing Amelia's palm. "No, not really." He thought about not bothering to answer. Amelia probably wouldn't remember by the next day. Most mortals didn't. But if she agreed to his offer, she deserved to know. "I can eat real food and some day I will die of old age like humans do."

"You are not human?" Her eyes widened, but she didn't pull away.

He continued, "I am a half-demon who was given special blood to extend my life." Would she understand what any of that meant? People of this time had little connection to the oldest legends, and they hadn't yet built new explanations for his kind that were near to the truth. "The blood I was given was from a cyvampis. A blood-drinking demon. Sometimes they are called vampire." Technically, vampires were humans that the cyvampis drained, killed and fed their demonic blood, but there was no point in making her fear something she'd likely never meet. "Taking that blood allows my mortal body to regenerate, using human blood."

Amelia stared blankly at him for several seconds. "Here I am holding hands with a half demon vampire. What is the other half? Werewolf?" A giggle slipped out from between her trembling lips.

He smiled at that. "No, but I do -- did know one." Was Amelia becoming hysterical? How could he relate that he wasn't so different? "I am half human. My father was human like you." Actually, his father had been almost as complicated as he was, but Granis was half human and was mortal enough to have died long ago.

"And your mother was a demon?" Her eyes were wide, shining emeralds. Unlike in his dreams, he couldn't tell her emotions clearly. Did the word "demon" cause her to fear him? He didn't want her fear, not ever.

"Yes, she still is a demon," he replied.



## Chapter 7

Amelia swallowed another giggle. Wasn't that just her kind of luck? The only seemingly decent man on the verge of courting her had a demon for a mother and a fetish for drinking her blood. Or he was completely mad. "This is a little too much to take in all at once. Could we talk about something else for a while?"

He patted her hand. "Of course. Why don't we order some food? Although, you do look good enough to eat."

"Oh, no, you don't," she started, but was interrupted by the servant coming to take their order. She waited, impatiently tapping her short nails while Grant ordered for them both.

"I was only teasing you and I am sorry. I never intended to hurt you or make you afraid of me."

"Even after what you told me, I have no fear of you, Grant. I probably should, but I am not afraid." She wondered if Grant was able to control her mind, but decided to not ask. Actually, when she thought about it all, he probably didn't have control of his own mind.

"Good, because I want to make you an offer."

"Oh?" Hopefully not the same kind of offer that Jones had made. Well, if it was the same, at least it would be wrapped in a more appealing package. The thought of touching Grant for real rushed through her. How would it feel to kiss him, touch him, make love with him? Would it be like the dream? Would he set her ablaze with pleasure until she incinerated with completion? Lord help her if this demon could do those things to her in the waking world. For if it was possible then she was lost. Never would she let him leave the bed nor would she ever wish to do so.

"You need a job and I need someone to help me organize my household."

Air whooshed out of her in a strangled gasp. "A housekeeper?" *A strange request for a demon!* She fought back the vivid image of Grant sprawled across a decadent bedspread in nothing but his neverminds. And his delicious neverminds would keep her hands and lips busy for hours.

"Yes, but with more control. More like a steward," Grant continued on, blithely failing to notice that she had caught fire and was combusting right before his eyes.

"I am not qualified for a position as a steward." Not only wasn't she qualified, but how could this be a real job offer, considering all she had just heard? What she wasn't sure of was whether she truly minded if his proposition was the same as Jones'.

"But you know what I am. None of the others do. I need someone who understands me and is not afraid." His silver-gray eyes pleaded with her.

So, she'd play along. At least this was an interesting turn in the conversation. "That makes sense, in a way. What does the position pay?"

"Whatever you want it to."

"What does that mean?"

"Money has no meaning to me. I can pay you very, very well. All I want is your loyalty."

"Loyalty? You mean I will have to do whatever you wish, like a slave? What rooms of the house does that include?" She tried to keep the hopeful note out of her voice. "Does that include the bedroom?"

He flinched, leaning back in his seat to study her coolly. "By loyalty, I meant that you would not try to kill me, help anyone who would want to, or tell others what I am." He took a deep breath before continuing. "I am interested in you as a woman, but that is not included in the job description. The truth of the matter is, I need to move to another city and my household is in shambles. My servants either pretend I don't exist, or run in fear of me when I am around. Either way, it is very frustrating."

"So would I have to move with you?" She had never been out of Paris, but as a child, she'd dreamed of traveling the world. Grant appeared so worldly. His refinement reminded her of the lost days when her family had flourished. Their wealth had

allowed many luxuries, including several books about far away lands. Ever since her nanny read those stories to her, she had dreamed of when she would leave Paris and see other lands.

Grant nodded. "We would need to leave almost immediately."

"What about my brother? Where would we live? Where do you plan to move to? Why are you moving?" She tried to keep the excitement from her voice, but knew she'd failed when his eyes lit up in triumph.

"A few people have noticed I have not aged. Although I once called these men friends, now they would cause me problems if given a chance. I would rather not offer them any opportunities. I plan to move to London where I have another home. You and your brother could have a suite within my home."

"Oh, you don't age?" He had said he would grow old eventually, had he not?

"I do, but very slowly."

"How old are you now?" He must have seen such great things!

"Very old." He signaled to the servant for more wine, delaying a real answer.

"How old?" she pressed him. He seemed used to putting off uncomfortable questions, but she wanted him to be honest with her about everything. If he wanted trust, he needed to give it as well.

He sighed and looked disgruntled that she would push this. "I watched the Egyptians build the pyramids."

"Thousands of years?" *That is old.* He didn't look more than thirty. She bit back on a flood of questions. His comment about the pyramids hinted that he had actually seen all the places she dreamed of.

After the servant brought their food, they settled into a comfortable silence. Each focused on inner thoughts, hiding their nervousness behind the act of eating.

Amelia considered the position that he offered. He needed a housekeeper whom he could trust. She desperately needed a reliable, paying job. Her only concern was that she didn't know him, but it would be the same with any new employment. Look how the last position was ending. What did his supposedly being a demon really mean?

Other than keeping house, what would he expect of her? "All right, I am considering accepting the position, but I want to know more."

"Fine, ask away."

"Is room and board included?" It was the least of her concerns.

"Yes. All my homes are large enough to provide you and your brother with a wing if you wish." She'd known all along he was wealthy, so that wasn't really very surprising.

"Would my brother have other children to play with?"

"The servants or neighbors may have children. I don't know. I have been away from London for a long while. If you want, he could be enrolled at a school."

School for Jean was even better than she had hoped and certainly better than he would ever have here in Paris. "Do you know many others like you? Would you be hosting parties and such? Would Jean and I be safe?" What exactly did a hostess serve to werewolves and vampires? Honey coated virgins?

"I don't think there are any others like me."

For a moment she wondered if that made him sad, but he didn't seem upset. "What about vampires and werewolves?"

"I do know many non-humans. I occasionally have parties and get-togethers, but you both would be under my protection, which is considerable." He said "non-humans" like there were many varieties and that would take some getting used to.

"What would be included in my duties?"

"The general running of my household. Sometimes as a go-between for the other servants. Hiring new servants, maintaining discipline and order. First, I would want you to organize the move to London. After that, it would be easier."

"Please, tell me the pay. I cannot determine what you think this job is worth."

He hesitated thoughtfully before naming a monthly figure ten times what she could even hope for with her education. It was a fortune. The money could mean stability for Jean. Then, he added, "Of course, that is just to start. All my employees'

wages increase the longer they are with me. It also includes room and board." It was all too good to be true. There was only the one small catch.

"Will you stop drinking my blood?" She held his gaze as she asked, even as he dipped his head, avoiding eye contact.

"I wish I could tell you yes, but all I can say is that if you ask, I will try to do as you wish."

"Do you always drink the blood of those who work for you?"

"Usually, but only enough to form a blood link which allows me to find them and to know if they betray me. Otherwise, I don't drink from them. I am not a vampire and I never need much blood to keep from aging." He shifted his weight and looked away from her guiltily. "I do not know why I can't seem to resist your taste. All I can promise is that I will never intentionally harm you and I will try to find the strength to do as you wish."

*He couldn't resist her taste?* The thought sent a warm shiver down her spine. Despite the strangeness, it made her feel special, desirable. "That is all I can ask. I think I will take the position, but I must speak with Jean before I say so."

"Wonderful. Can you come to my home tomorrow afternoon to start? I can send a carriage. I mean, if Jean agrees." Grant smiled broadly and relaxed back in his seat. She hadn't realized how tense he'd been. Her answer must have meant a lot.

"Yes. I think he will like the idea. After all, you bring him nice gifts. The sword was from you, wasn't it?"

"It was. I'm glad he liked it."

## Chapter 8

After the meal, they began the long walk home.

"Are you sure you don't want me to send for a carriage?" Grant asked for the third time. "I know you were on your feet all day and it is a long walk."

"I was and it is, but I like to walk. And I shall have that much longer to pry information from you." They walked side by side, close, but being careful to not touch. Whatever was between them was too new to act on outside of their dreams.

He laughed. "You need only to ask."

"Very well, tell me all about werewolves. Are they as decent as demons? Or do they really go about and eat small children."

"Not all demons are decent. Not all are evil either. Like men, we all must be judged as individuals. Werewolves, too. Though, I have never known one that ate a child."

"That seems very fair minded. Have you ever watched them change into wolves? What is that like?" In her excitement, she laid a hand on his arm and was shocked by the tingle where they connected, stronger than anything inside dreams.

"Yes, I knew one very well, and it is completely magical. Most can shift forms in the blink of an eye. If you were not watching for it, you might miss the change completely."

"Oh, and can they change into other animals?" She used the last of her willpower to pull her hand away and focus on the conversation.

"Many can. And there are other types of shape changers. I traveled for a long while with a dragon who could take human form."

"A dragon!" The word alone inspired tall tales of powerful monsters and valiant knights.

"Jerdin was probably my closest friend for nearly all my life."

"From what you say, that would be a long friendship. What happened to him?" How would she feel if she were to meet all these magical beings? If Jerdin was important to Grant, she hoped she would someday have the chance to know him.

"His father sent him to ground after his wife died. I think he rests still. He may never wake." Grant's voice broke slightly over the last word. Obviously, Jerdin's friendship had meant a great deal and his loss still hurt Grant.

"Sent him to ground? What does that mean?"

"Somewhere deep in the earth he sleeps away the centuries until he can face the world again, if ever."

The idea of some immortal man loving his wife so much that he could not live without her was truly the makings of fairy tales. Still, it pained her to think of a love that strong and a man or dragon trapped neither in life nor death.

Although the streets were not crowded, a large man walking toward them shoved his way between them. She thought he was just being rude. Grant, however, grabbed the man and flung him away from them.

"Stay behind me, Amelia. He is armed."

"Lady, do you know what creature of darkness you walk with?" the stranger shouted. "Do you know why he only walks at night? He is a blood-sucking demon and he must die."

"All true, but we have no need to hear your grievances." Grant lifted the man to his feet and brushed aside the sword that was thrust at him. The man's mouth moved, but no words came forth. Grant pulled him close and laid his palm to the man's forehead. The man immediately sagged, unconscious.

Grant settled the man on the ground, leaning against the wall. For all appearances, he could be thought a drunk, sleeping off his indulgence.

Leaving the man behind, they continued their walk. Neither broke the sudden silence, still thinking of the attack, but lacking the courage to discuss it.

Amelia wanted to return to the pleasant time before the attack. She wanted to continue their light conversation so she asked the only thing that came to mind that felt safe. "So, why do you only go out at night?"

"I can go out in daylight, but the cyvampis blood makes me rather sensitive to bright light. It does me no harm, but can make my eyes water. I won't burst into flame in sunlight, but the night suits me better."

Amelia looked back at the man they had left on the street. He looked dead. Was this man that she enjoyed being with so much a cold-blooded killer? The whole scene had moved so fast, but had it been necessary to kill the man? Yet, she still walked at Grant's side, without fear. "Is he dead?" She whispered the question that might lead to her fearing Grant, a place she never wished to go.

"No. Pierre is only sleeping. In the morning he won't remember what brought him to sleeping on the corner."

"Was he the reason you must move to London?" If the threat was now gone, would he be moving? Would he even need her?

"Yes, his brother attacked me two nights ago and now him." Grant frowned thoughtfully, but said no more about it.

"And yet you didn't kill him?" She should have known he wouldn't kill the man. Surely that ruthless quality would be obvious to her after what they had done together.

"Nor his brother. I had no reason to."

"But he tried to kill you!" Her heart jumped in fear for him. Did he have people trying to kill him often?

"I was in no danger from him. I am not easy to kill."

Perhaps he was right. He had handled the attack in seconds, without killing the man, or even drawing attention to the problem. "I see. I walk with a pacifist blood-sucking demon."

\* \* \*



Grant was thrilled with how smoothly the evening went. If he could resist taking her blood, it would be all he could hope for. He would walk her to her building and say good-bye with no more than a short, chaste kiss.

He would not tempt the Norns by indulging in the taste of her lips. He would not feel her lovely weight in his arms. He definitely would not drag his over-sensitive fangs across the soft skin of her throat.

He would escort Amelia to her home as a gentleman. Even if it killed him.

Her decrepit building loomed out of the darkness of the unlit street. When she lived in his home, Amelia would never again have to fear what lurked in the darkened corners. There she would be under his protection. Amelia would be safe.

Safe from everything but him.

Amelia turned just before the doorway. He was so close that her hip brushed over his swollen cock. The contact sizzled through him and up his spine. His senses pulsed as a red haze flooded his vision. By blinking hard, he focused on her upturned face.

"I want to thank you for what you did at the tavern."

The tavern? She must mean with the uncouth bastard who had dared to lay rough hands on her. He might still return there to pay the scoundrel another visit. Amelia stared up at him with a puzzled expression. "No need to thank me. I was pleased to be there when you had need of my rescue." Of their own volition, his hands reached out and cupped her slim shoulders.

"You still have my gratitude. If you had not been there..." Amelia shuddered.

He pulled Amelia into his arms to offer comfort with his body when words failed him. Her warmth touched him as easily as her hands which crept up to his chest. The innocent contact unraveled his self-control.

He had to have her, kiss her, taste her... With a single deft motion, he claimed her mouth and plundered her slightly parted lips. She was ambrosia, his own gift from the gods. Amelia's sweet tongue tangled up with his in challenge and conquest. Where

he knew she remained an innocent in body, she sparred with the experience of all they had shared in dreams.

Unlike their first kiss within dreams, this one caught him up in searing flames and burnt him down to smoldering ashes. The reality of her touch was enough to undo him. His hunger surged and his fangs throbbed with the thirst.

Reluctantly, Grant pulled back from Amelia. If he was to keep his promise to her and the one to his mother, he had to stop now.

He pinched his eyes closed and breathed in and out until he regained control. "I had a wonderful time this evening, Amelia. I shall await your visit on the morrow."

"It will hardly be a visit if I am to take up a position in your employ."

"Call it however you wish. I will await your presence with impatience. For this night, I must let you go so that we may both find our rest."

"Good night, Grant. Sweet dreams." Amelia hurried inside.

Grant watched until she and her brother were safely into their own room, then he fought his feet the entire way back to his own home.

As a distraction, he attempted to contact his mother several times, each time with the same result. He could not sense her at all. There'd been many times when she closed the connection between them to prevent inconvenient interruptions, but this felt more ominous.

\* \* \*

As Amelia expected, Jean thought the idea of living with Grant was wonderful. He didn't mind moving and wanted to know what London would be like.

She didn't tell him about what Grant claimed he was. Despite enjoying Grant's company, she still had doubts about his sanity and possibly her own. Amelia couldn't understand why, but his explanations seemed right and felt honest.

One disappointment was that Grant hadn't visited her dreams during the night. Was he trying to keep his promise? Or had something else kept him away? The thought of another attack on him tightened her heart. Even if Grant thought he was beyond

harm, she worried for him while they were still here in Paris where men would murder him for what they thought he was.

After she left Jean with the neighbors, she waited for the coach Grant had coerced her into accepting. The elegant closed buggy made the short ride a pleasure. As expensive as the buggy was, it appeared simple compared to the lavish mansion that was Grant's home.

Her driver led her to the ornate double doors and an elderly butler announced her arrival, sending one of the maids to wake Monsieur Grant. Minutes later Grant stalked down the stairs to join her. Although impeccably dressed as always, he looked haggard and stressed.

He immediately grasped her hand like a lifeline. "Welcome to my home, Amelia. Maybe you will be able to take these fools in hand so I can get some rest."

"Have you not yet slept then?"

"Not a wink. You are here to accept the job, right?" There was a certain harassed tone to his voice that gave his hard appearance a vulnerable air.

"Oh, yes." She laughed at his exaggerated sigh.

"Can you start today?"

"I can start now if you wish. What needs done?" He still held her hand. The contact warmed her and brought a blush to her cheeks. Even holding his hand in such an innocent way reminded her of his touch in her dreams and from the night before.

"Nearly everything." He ran his fingers through his loose hair with a frustrated groan. "My personal and business belongings need to be readied for shipment and most of the house will have to be closed off." He glared at the butler lingering nearby. "It seems no matter how I try to explain my wishes, none of these usually intelligent people can understand. I give you the power to terminate the employment of anyone who is not following your directions and to hire anyone extra you may need." He yawned and tried to hide it with his palm. "I can give you a tour of the place to get you started."

She stopped him. "One of the others can give me the tour. You should go get some sleep." There was no reason for him to be up when she could manage on her own.

"So I look that bad? I will then, but promise to wake me if you need anything at all."

"I promise."

He brushed his lips over her cheek in a brief caress and left to return upstairs.

She turned to find the butler pretending to not eavesdrop. "Monsieur, can you tell me who would be the best choice to give me a tour of the house?"

"That would be the Monsieur Grant, but second best is Sarah, Mademoiselle. She can show you around. I will have her summoned at once."

Sarah was very knowledgeable about the house. At about forty, she had lived there her entire life, with her mother being the housekeeper and caretaker before her. Sarah showed the house in a fast walk and still took two hours to do so. The house was enormous and lavish. It had every luxury of the day, many that she had never seen before. The upstairs suites were absolutely decadent with thick carpeting, large windows, and antique marvels. Grant's room was identified, but they did not enter. Otherwise, Amelia saw every corner and cupboard.

By the end of the tour, she realized the overwhelming size of the task she had agreed to. Still, with Grant's army of servants, it was far from impossible.

By the time Grant rejoined them that evening, the third floor was done except for drying and packing the linens away.

Grant was suitably impressed with their headway and invited her to dine with him. One concern continued to nag at her during her day and she broached the subject over dessert.

"Grant, I am nervous about the move to London. What if something goes wrong? I won't know anyone there who would help me and Jean."

"You will know me," he said as if that were all that could matter.

"I don't know you now. What if you fire me after the move, or if I quit for some reason? I will have no way to come back here or to find lodgings or anything." At least

here, she and Jean had the Pentreaux family to lean on in an emergency. True, they couldn't help her for long, but they would do as much as they could manage.

"I think I understand. Come with me and we can ease your fears now." She followed him from the dining room downstairs to a massive vault in the basement.

"Amelia, I don't ever want you to feel trapped or helpless again. I am not like that tavern owner. I will never take your choices from you." He reached into the vault and took out two small, but heavy, bags of gold coins. "Now you will have protection if anything should ever go wrong. Those bags hold enough gold for you to live on for a year or more. This is not part of your wage. This is the gift of security." After locking the vault, he surprised her by pulling the ribbon from her hair and threading the key onto it. "This key is part of your job, but it, too, will provide security. If for any reason you have need, I give you permission to use my funds to ensure your own safety and happiness." He slipped the key's ribbon about her neck, the warm metal nestling between her breasts.

She was shocked speechless by his generosity. The gift of the gold was precious in the security it offered her and Jean. It was more money than they had since their parents' deaths. She clutched the bags tightly.

The key, she was less sure about. No one had so much money they could afford to hand out keys to their money vaults. Did they? Surely not. Besides, the London house would have a different vault and probably a different key. That must be the explanation. He'd already moved most of his money? The key was more of a token.

Grant motioned for her to precede him, but her feet remained rooted in place. How was he able to take every concern and turn it around with a simple action? He ordered his world for comfort and shared that comfort with those around him.

"Amelia?" His warm hand cupped her elbow, shooting sparks through her shawl, tingling over her flesh. "Are you well?"

"Oh, Grant. I don't know what to say. You are so generous."

The candlelight flickered over the planes of his handsome face. The corners of his lips lifted uncertainly. "Just say that this will make you happy. Say that you will stay with me."

How could he think she wouldn't? He was all she wanted to dream of and who she wanted to spend her days with as well. She dropped the heavy bags onto a table and reached for Grant. Her hands slid to his shoulders, tugging him down to meet her lips.

She wasn't sure of her own intentions beyond showing him that she cared for him in this world as well as in their dreams.

The moment her lips brushed over his, all intentions were lost to sensation. He was softer, firmer and warmer. The dreams were a pale imitation of the man she held.

Grant's arms closed around her, stroking down her back, but making no demands.

She pressed up against his hard chest, untying his hair bury her fingers in its lush silk. Her lips caressed his, inviting him to deepen the kiss. She silenced the part of her that said this was wrong, dug her fingers into his black mane and dragged him lower.

Desire shot through her in such decadent waves. Yet she wanted more of this, more of him. She opened her mouth against his, feeling his moan vibrating through lips and chest.

His arms tightened, pulling her flush against him, crushing her tingling breasts. One of his hands stroked down over her back and waist, settling over her buttocks. He squeezed her, and then cupped his hand, lifting her up from the ground. The tight hard contact sizzled from lips to thighs and made obvious his rising desire. The position pressed his hardened staff intimately against her aching center.

Her arms tightened around his neck. She used the leverage to grind into him. Her tongue darted in to lick over his, hesitating when she felt fang-like incisors.

His arms clenched as she licked over their sharpened tips. A deep growl rumbled in his chest.

She repeated the motion. The fang seemed larger, lengthening.

Grant pulled free from the kiss with a gasp. With a fluid motion, he set Amelia onto the table.

For a single moment, Amelia wondered if she had done something wrong, and then he was returning to her arms and meeting her lips once more. This time, the contact was sweet and lingering instead. Each touch was drawn out, leaving her aching and needing more. Heat pooled through her as his hands blazed slow trails of fire down her back and across her hips.

Grant's mouth left hers and rained kisses down her neck to the rise of her right breast. Would he bite her? Would she really complain if he did?

He didn't bite. Instead, he loosened her stays and claimed her freed breasts with hand and mouth. Amelia's fingers clenched into his shoulders as the cool air and his warm breath teased at her nipples. She knew she should stop him. Society said what he was doing was wrong, but it all felt so very right. She couldn't imagine wanting him to do anything but continue.

Then he stopped. Grant drew back from her. His shoulders shuddered under her hands. Amelia's eyes flew open and caught his smoldering gray gaze. "What have I done wrong?"

His expression lightened with a roguish grin. "Nothing, my dear Amelia. Everything you do to me is perfect." His lips dived in once more for another heated kiss, before they moved back to her exposed breasts and then lower. His hands roamed back to her hips and then drew her long skirts upward. One hand slid along her thigh and pushed aside her underthings to land hotly against the center of her desire. Just like in her dreams, his touch on the sensitive folds of her sex left her wet and panting for more.

His shoulders dropped lower and then his mouth joined his hands over her mound. She started at the thought of his mouth over her most feminine parts. She gripped at his dark head as if to stop him.

That was when he licked up over her cunt.

Her unspoken objection came forth on a moan. Her fingers sank deeper into his hair, using it to anchor him. His short chuckle rippled through her in a spasm of need.

He tasted her again and again, licking through her flesh. Dipping his tongue into her channel, suckling over her clit, until she was sure she would die from the sensation. She wrapped her legs around him and gripped at him. She was oblivious to all but his touch and it threw her wildly from her body, shooting her into the clouds.

When she came back to herself, Grant cradled her tightly against his chest. Her legs remained around him, now at his waist. His ragged breath blew into her hair and against her neck. She could feel his lips lingering just above her skin. She could imagine his sharp teeth waiting to sink into her. Amelia shivered at the dark desire to have him do just that, despite all her earlier demands that he not drink her blood.

Amelia lifted her face and pressed kisses up his throat to his jaw, finally reaching his lips. He tasted, not unpleasantly, of the peculiar tang of her body. He kissed her back, hard and deep. His long incisors swelled and throbbed when she licked over them.

Then he drew back from their tight embrace.

His gaze met hers. "I'm sorry, Amelia. I need a moment if I'm to hold my promise." The whispered words sounded ragged and strained.

She opened her mouth to offer him more, to offer him everything, but the words caught and remained unspoken. He helped her to neaten her clothing and lifted her from the table, setting her back on her unsteady feet, before pulling her back into his embrace.



## Chapter 9

"You are amazing," Grant said as they rode together ahead of the two wagons. In no time at all, she had closed the house and packed the wagons. Here they were, already on their way to London. He had given Amelia a little gray mare of her own to ride and offered a pony to Jean, but the boy chose to ride in the wagons.

"Thank you, but why do you say that?"

"The household that I could not budge, you've managed to have rolling along in less than a week." Absolutely amazing.

"Did you know that the servants thought they would all be fired?"

"Really?" That did surprise him.

"I know you will not need most of them while not living there, but they knew nothing about your parting gifts. They thought they would be left with nothing and so were intentionally delaying your departure to ensure at least another week's wage while they looked for new positions."

"Is that what was happening? I should have guessed." He sighed. Instead of reading their minds or demanding they explain themselves, he had let the frustration get to him.

"They have no fear of you either. They acted like they did so they could get away to look for employment. After I explained your gifts, they were all very cooperative and admitted what they had been doing."

"Good." He didn't want any hard feeling with his former staff. The idea that they were afraid of him after so long living among them had been odd.

"You know, if you keep giving money away like that, you will be destitute before long." There was true worry in her tone.

“Have no worry for my fortune. There is little chance that it will ever become a concern no matter how much I give away.” He laughed at the thought. It was far more than unlikely, impossible as far as he could see. Since he expected his life to be this long, he made a habit of collecting soon-to-be antiques and storing them in his many vaults around the world. Not to mention, he had misspent his “youth,” visiting the earliest of civilizations giving him plenty of priceless treasures which often started out as everyday items.

He also invested his money in starting many, many businesses that paid him annual tributes. These, he didn’t even try to keep track of. He thought of it as charity work that occasionally paid back. He would give honest people the start up funds to build their dreams into reality, claiming himself as a silent partner. Often, these people succeeded and added to his wealth. Sarah’s husband had been one of those people and he now owned a clothing store which did very well. The couple planned to hire a few of the people who would have a harder time finding work now that the house was closed.

He always took care of his people.

What a joke. He was half demon. What people could he claim? What family he did have was not easily claimed. He had some scattered descendants who, for their own good, he couldn’t be close to, and his mother, whom he now couldn’t reach.

Amelia picked up on his concern and asked, “What’s wrong? You look sad. Did you realize just how much money you were throwing away?”

“I was thinking of my mother.” He often couldn’t reach her, but this felt too much like she was being blocked from him.

“And that makes you sad?”

“I haven’t been able to speak with her. I’m worried that she might be hurt or captured again.”

“Oh, who would want to catch her?”

“She is a demon. She has many enemies, but I was thinking... You really don’t want to know.” He was thinking the unthinkable.

“Yes, I do. Please, tell me.”

"It all started when I fed from you two nights in a row. I told her about my fear that I was turning full vampire and she promised to find out what the cause was. I have not been able to reach her since then."

"So she was nearby?"

Last she'd told him, she had been relaxing on some Asian island. "I don't know where she was. We can speak mentally even over long distances." Their link had always been strong.

"I don't understand, but go on."

Grant reached across to her to take her hand in his. *Amelia? Can you hear me?*

"Yes! I heard that, but your lips did not move. How could I hear you if you did not speak?"

*Think your answers without speaking. Can you try?* So few could speak in this way, but he truly hoped Amelia would be one who could.

*I'll try. Did you hear that?*

*You have a beautiful mind voice.* More than beautiful, her voice drifted over him like warm water, welcoming and enticing.

*How is that possible? Is it only when we touch? Can everyone do this, and they just don't know it?*

*Many non-humans can mind speak. I can form a link with anyone I have fed from. Some who know me well may be able to answer my calls like you can. My mother and I have always been able to link unless someone more powerful prevents it.*

*So for you to not be able to talk with your mother most likely means something happened to her?*

*Yes, and I am scared for her.* Scared and guilty. She had surely come to harm trying to answer his silly question. When with effort, a great deal of effort, he could resist taking Amelia's blood on his own.

*Is there anyone who can help you find out? Somewhere you should go to look for her?*

*If she was captured by her master or the wyrm then I can do little to help her. He'd thought about it often and she must have returned home to seek the answer. Home was not a place he would ever willingly go.*

*Who is her master? Who or what is the wyrm and why can't you go after her?*

*Sadrina's master is a demon lord named Pahele. He sits upon the right-hand throne in hell and rules over all the Tascryn demons. The wyrm is my own affectionate term for Jerdin's maternal father.*

*Is Jerdin your friend, the dragon? What do you mean by maternal father? I do not understand.*

*Jerdin's family is by far more bizarre than my own. Basically, Jerdin is a deity. His true father is the Celtic god of rebirth, Cernunnos. His maternal father is the bastard son of the Norse god Loki, named Jormungand, also called the Midgard Serpent. Jormungand took the form of a beautiful maiden and seduced Cernunnos with the purpose of giving birth to Jerdin. That is how he has two fathers.*

*And this is your best friend? Amelia refused to meet his gaze, staring resolutely between the ears of her mount.*

*Yes. Jerdin is also my master. I was given to him as a gift from Jormungand.*

*Amelia's gaze jumped to his. A gift? As in slave?*

*Sort of. I was supposed to spy on Jerdin and convince him to do what his father wanted. Jormungand held my mother captive to ensure I would follow his directions. Fortunately, Jerdin and Jorm have never had a good relationship. Eventually, Jerdin and I freed my mother.*

*So you think he might have recaptured your mother?*

*Not really. It would make little sense with Jerdin grounded. Unless perhaps, Jerdin awakened and he wishes me to return to service. Part of him leaped with joy at returning to Jerdin, but the rest turned over in fear of what would happen if Jerdin rose.*

*Can you find out if he has awakened?*

*He went to ground in this part of the world, Scotland, near a loch. I could go there. He could, but the real question was, should he? He missed his friend and if Jerdin awoke, he would require a companion.*

We. Amelia's quiet correction was filled with determination.

*We? Yes. I would like you to meet him if he is awake. It is almost time to make camp for the night. Then I can take us there.*

They stopped and made camp within the hour. Grant told the wagon master that he and Amelia would be taking a walk and not to look for them until morning. The man promised to watch over Jean as well, giving them time to be alone. Although Grant planned to be back quickly, he didn't want the men panicking if they could not be found in the area.

He called Amelia to his side, motioning for silence as they walked. Once they were away from the small clearing, he pulled her into his arms. "Thank you for helping me with this."

"You wanted someone to trust. I want to be that someone for you."

"I want..." there was so much that he dared not ask for, "... you to close your eyes. I can take us to the loch, but the motion might make you ill if you try to look."

He pulled his long cloak around the two of them and used a gift Jerdin had given him to move them to the loch, or to wherever Jerdin was. This power would take him to Jerdin's side, no matter the distance or location, as long as he was on this plane. Elsewhere was possible, but a bit more difficult.

This time there wasn't much motion to see, but he wanted to shield her from seeing the flash of his home realm of hell or any others that might appear as they were pulled to their destination. The moving of their essence opened them to what could be an overwhelming wash of the senses, the flush of many scents, and flash of several realms and, sometimes, the feel of hands pressing them onward.

"You can open your eyes now."

They stood on the side of a large lake. The wind blew stiffly across the blue-gray water, forming short splashing ripples. The cold air coming off the lake chilled their breath into icy clouds. Although Grant still held her wrapped against his warm body Amelia began to shiver.

"Don't worry. We won't stay long," Grant said, hugging her tight in his arms. "I can feel Jerdin here. I will call to him now. Do you wish to listen?"

"Will he mind?" Her teeth chattered over the words.

"No. He will like you if I can get him to wake at all." Grant hesitated. *Jerdin? Awake and answer my call. Awake. Jerdin?*

At first, there was no response. Jerdin was near, but it might be too soon for him to rise. He was put to ground for a very good reason and perhaps shouldn't yet awaken. He was about to mention his misgivings to Amelia when the ground shook beneath them.

Amelia let out a short, startled scream and clung to him as he braced for another quake. "What is happening, Grant?" Amelia cried into his chest.

"Jerdin," Grant answered aloud before trying to calm his friend's shuddering. *Jerdin! Be at ease, my friend, or you will shake us into the loch.*

*Grant?* The ragged whisper ripped through Grant's mind as he shielded Amelia from the brunt of the cry. His concern that Jerdin should not yet awaken was confirmed with the agonizing contact.

*Yes, and a new friend.* Would his growing relationship with Amelia cause Jerdin more pain?

The ground stopped shaking. *A woman?* The voice was empty, neutral.

*Yes. Her name is Amelia and she is dear to me. Could you come meet her?*

*No.* The earth trembled then settled once more. *But I am happy for you. You have come for another reason.*

*Sadrina is missing. I was hoping you could help me reach her.*

Straight to the point as always. Jerdin could read his mind quite easily and would know his fears without asking. The asking was a polite skill Jerdin had finally gained after more than a few millennia of being irritable and demanding. His tendency was to do what had to be done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

There was a long pause and then Jerdin said, *Sadrina has returned to her master.*

*But why would she do that after all we did to free her?* She was home with Pahele. Of the choices, that was the better of two terrible fates.

*She sought an answer for you. Her return was the price, but she is well and unharmed.*

*I cannot reach her then? He prevents our contact.* Well and unharmed? Pahele had never hurt her in the past, but he demanded obedience and forced her compliance. Now he'd stolen her precious freedom.

*I could speak to Uncle Pahele, if you wish. He has always been fond of you and may relent.*

*Please do.* He could do nothing to get her free of Pahele if she had returned to him willingly, but perhaps he could regain their link.

Suddenly, the heavy weight in their minds gave way to a vast emptiness that left both him and Amelia sagging to the ground. Grant lifted her to his lap where he wrapped them together again within his cloak.

"He is in such pain." Tears filled Amelia's eyes.

"I know," Grant answered sadly. "I should not have awakened him. Of all his long life, Vinola is the only woman he gave his heart to. Vinola's death was too horrible for even one of his strength."

"Wait." Amelia caught his lapel in her hands. "Didn't you say his father is the god of rebirth? Can't she be brought back to life or something?" She continued to shiver violently while held tight against his body.

"She could and I know Cernunnos would do so for him. I don't know why he has not done so."

"You told him I am dear to you. Did you mean it?"

"Yes." He kissed her tenderly, but was interrupted by Jerdin's mental voice.

*Grant. I have spoken with Pahele. He will allow you and Sadrina to speak and he answered your question.*

*Thank you, Jerdin. What did he say?* If he deepened his relationship with Amelia, he still feared he would be unable to resist the call of her blood.

*You will never turn. Your demon blood will not allow it. You will have to ask Pahele for the details, but it involves rules about not crossing branches of hell's hierarchy. And we really have enough crossed branches already, don't you think?* Jerdin's sardonic voice was typical after years of disdain over his origins and responsibilities.

*But what causes the craving, then?* What else could it possibly mean? Would it get better or worse?

*What you crave is not the blood.* Jerdin's thoughts paused.

Grant could picture his friend so clearly and felt Jerdin struggle for patience. The ground trembled under them with the effort.

*You long for the woman and perhaps this once, you will have to win her in the more normal course of things.*

*Thank you again. I know this was not easy for you. You should return to ground, to your rest.* The pain still tore through each of Jerdin's thoughts. His words were cutting and embittered.

*I have decided to rise. I wish to see my son. Do you know how he fares?* Jerdin's voice calmed. Was it the thought of his son, who was part of Vinola?

*He was well last I saw him, but their clan moved after the massacre and I have not seen him since.* The moment the thought passed, Grant realized his error. He never should have been the one to tell Jerdin about the attack on the clan.

*I will go to him.* The calm in Jerdin's voice was more frightening than the pain or anger. Jerdin was always calm in battle. He was passionate most other times. So the quiet sound of his voice offered no comfort, only promised retribution to the world that would dare to threaten his son.

He expected a fight and would be disappointed. Grant was strong in many ways, but he couldn't go against his friend even when he knew the holocaust Jerdin's wrath would bestow on the world. If Jerdin rose and unleashed his anger, Grant would be at his side, offering strength and, when possible, temperance.



*No, my son, you will not rise. A new voice entered filled with a soft strength. It is not yet time for you to come forth. Your child is well and strong and I will watch over him until you are able to return.*

Grant breathed a sigh of relief. The new voice was Cernunnos who would take charge of Jerdin and be sure he was safely settled back to rest. Although Grant would have willingly returned to Jerdin's side, he knew that was not the best choice for the world.

*Father? What of Vinola?* The calm was gone from Jerdin; only the desperation remained.

Cernunnos filled their minds with peaceful thoughts. *I still search for her soul. I will awaken you when she is found. For now, you must rest.* The last was said with such power that even Grant began to relax into the command.

Jerdin's mind touch faded, but the other remained. Grant gently kept Amelia from this part of the conversation.

*Grant, you fare well I see.* Cernunnos often shared his kindness with Grant. He made only one request in all his years, one that Grant found easy to follow. *Watch over my son by being his friend.*

*Thank you and I thank you for sending Jerdin back to ground. I know now it was a mistake to wake him. I worried what he might do if he arose while still in such pain.*

*You were right to fear. He has no compassion to offer the world and would return with no more than wrath and vengeance. Jerdin will only be whole when Vinola is returned to him. Until then, he will sleep.*

*Will you send us back to our camp? I can only travel one way to Jerdin's side. I had hoped Jerdin would send us back. Otherwise, I will have to unfurl my wings and I'm not sure Amelia is ready for that.* He still held her in his arms, but she was now staring at him puzzled. She could not hear what Cernunnos said. Perhaps Cernunnos could tell him if they had a chance at happiness.

*You worry too much about her acceptance. She is wiser than you in many ways. An example of your worry is your fear of losing her,* Cernunnos chastised him.

*But I will lose her, to old age if nothing else. Could he find a way to hold her for eternity?*

*You can have a single, long lifetime with her. Such a thing is a great gift.*

*Will she still think so when she grows old and I stay the same? How could growing old be considered a blessing? And would time always be the devil he faced to be with her? Would the chance to be together be worth the pain of losing her?*

*She will accept you, but you could hide your youth from sight if you wish. As it always is with love, she will only see with her heart. And speaking of seeing the real you, she will see your wings soon enough. But I will send you back and save you the unwanted effort.*

*You do know me well.* He pulled Amelia to her feet and started to warn her to hang on when they blinked onto the path next to their camp. *Thanks, Cern!*

"Oh, my! How did we get back here?"

Grant kissed the top of her head. How much had she heard? How much should he tell her?

She pulled back from his embrace. "Grant? Who was that last voice, the one who felt like a river of silk?"

"I always preferred the description 'a voice like the breath of butterfly wings'."

"Who was he?" she persisted.

"Cernunnos."

"Cernunnos, as in the Celtic god of rebirth, Cernunnos? I thought so but... Oh, my, I heard the voice of a god."

He smiled at her excitement and wondered what she would think when she found out he was one quarter god himself. "I thought you might be hard to convince."

"Hard to convince!" She pulled him down into a short kiss, releasing him almost immediately. "Do you realize how many non-humans I have learned about in the last week?" She kissed him again.

She swayed close for another quick kiss and he caught her tight in his arms, drawing her in for a longer, deeper kiss. This time he didn't fight to hide his fangs when her touch aroused him, making his cock harden and his fangs lengthen. This time, he

crushed her against his body and allowed her to explore his sensitive, elongated incisors.

He feared that she would pull away or be disgusted by how his demonic body reacted to her.

Instead, she licked over the sharp points, drawing a growl from him.

"How does that feel when I touch your teeth like that?"

Another growl escaped his lips before he gathered control enough to speak. "It feels very good." He lifted her in his arms, laying her down onto a blanket that he materialized from their camp. Here in the privacy of the woods, he would show her what she did to him.

She reached for him, forcing him to his knees beside her. She pulled him back into a kiss while his hands feathered over her ribs and down to her slim waist.

She caught his hair and pulled the rest of it free of its restraint. The tingle of her fingers against his scalp and the release of his mane freed something wild within him. His lips devoured her, dominating the burning desire, forcing her to bend to his will.

One hand slid from her hip and tugged her skirt up to move underneath, pushing aside her underthings. "You asked what your tongue brushing over my fangs feels like. This is what that feels like." His hand claimed her feminine mound, fingers tickling over her moist entry. His thumb rubbed over her already slick, swollen clit.

"Oh..." she moaned as he sunk a finger deep into her.

He withdrew then plunged two fingers into her tight sheath. She was soaked with her need. Her tight body clenched onto his fingers. Her scent drove him over the brink of restraint.

"Oh, Grant. I want you." Her moaned words tore through him. "I want to make love with you."

Without another thought, he was between her thighs. His cock surged free of his breeches and pressed against her hot, searing entrance. One moment of conscience was all he had the strength for. "Are you sure?" he asked her. Catching her chin, he forced Amelia to meet his gaze.

"Yes," she cried out as he pushed his hard length deep.

He claimed her lips as he claimed her body. She was his and no other's. He swallowed her cry as her maidenhead was breached, quickly connecting to her mind to ease any pain. What he felt from her was a fierce desire that matched his own.

She rolled her hips upward, begging for more. Her breasts arched up, hard against his chest.

He stroked into her long and deep, controlling the pace, building the tension. She responded to each motion with her own. Her hands tangled into his hair keeping him close. Her hips matched his rhythm.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she arched under him. Then they moved lower to claw at his ass, urging on his deep strokes.

He buried his cock deep. His hand slid under her hip to lift her tight and hard against him. With a cry, she clenched around him, her cunt tightening and gripping him, milking the pleasure from them both.

He felt tremors course through her body and the ecstasy sweeping through their connection almost ruined his control. He sped up his strokes, holding her in the moment, drawing out her pleasure. His lips claimed hers and she pressed painfully against his burning fangs. He ached to sink them into her tender throat, not to fill a thirst, but to complete the connection.

Her tongue darted into his mouth, swiping over his teeth, tangling with his tongue. Then she shifted, clinging in his arms. The end of her tongue homed in on a fang and she twisted it to fold around his sharp incisor and suckle on its swollen tip.

His control was gone. He slammed into her once more and was lost to oblivion.

## Chapter 10

### London, one month later

Amelia stared hard until the hateful woman gave in and nodded agreement. All she had asked the woman to do was use the new table settings for the evening meal. Now the woman would probably run to Grant to complain again about her management. The housekeeper objected to every single change that she had tried so far.

All she wanted to do was earn the wage that Grant insisted on paying her. After finishing the move and settling into the London house, there was little to fill her time.

Not that Grant seemed to mind. He said he wanted her to save her energy for him. Recently, his courting had turned more serious. Although Grant continued to stay out of her dreams, he took her to private parties, balls and all over town. It seemed he had plans for them nearly every evening, often ending with her spending the morning in his arms.

He said the sweetest things and showered her with tokens and gifts. Although she treasured each new piece of jewelry, she also still wore his token key now hanging from a fine, gold chain. One day she'd been curious and tried it in the new vault. The shock when it had opened had almost caused her to faint. The key did indeed work and the vault was filled with gold coins and a variety of other treasures. The same key also opened four other large vaults in the London house. True to his word he had actually given her a key to his fortune.

Their romance was all so wonderful and normal that she was beginning to question if she had imagined the entire first half of their relationship. Well, it was normal except for the times she felt his fangs. And of course the time she had awakened with bite marks on her thigh...

Whether he was a crazy man, a demon or eccentric millionaire mattered not at all. She had fallen completely in love with Grant and was happy here in London.

Tonight, they planned to spend a quiet evening at home. He would be awake by now, and down for dinner soon. Perhaps she should see if he needed anything before coming down. She wouldn't mind helping him to dress, or possibly undress. Although they made love often and spent most nights and mornings together, she dearly missed the steamy, erotic dreams they had shared.

As she started for the stairs, Grant came down already dressed. Elegant and graceful, that was her Grant. He was dressed in a fine black silk shirt, tailored loosely to accent his wide shoulders and slim waist.

"Ah, Amelia, join me for a glass of wine before dinner. I would like to speak with you."

Amelia glided to his side, sliding her hand into his and tilting her face up to meet his kiss. She loved to touch him. Felt compelled to even against societal rules, though they kept their physical touching to hand holding and the occasional light kiss when in public.

It warmed her heart to know Grant felt the same need and initiated the contact as often as she. Even now, he twined his fingers between hers.

Grant led her to the smaller private library that they both preferred because of its cozy fire and plush furniture. Once alone, he pulled her into his embrace and claimed her with a dominant kiss, so deep and lingering that her knees weakened. "Amelia, I have been thinking about us. I know we have not had a normal chance to become acquainted, but I have tried to court you in the human way as you deserve."

"Grant, you..."

"Please, Amelia, let me finish. I want to tell you all of this. I love you. I want us to be together. I have kept nothing from you. I will never lie to you about what I am. We may have many problems that will need working through, but I want to spend a lifetime loving you. Will you marry me?"

"Oh Grant! Yes, I will marry you." She slipped her hands around his neck and pulled his lips to hers. The long kiss left them both breathless. "I only want to be with you."

Grant filled their glasses and led her back to the dining room where Jean was already waiting for them. Amelia nearly laughed at the sly wink that Grant gave her brother. They had obviously planned this out together. "Well, Jean, she agreed! We can start planning the wedding. Are you happy to be gaining me as a brother?"

One of the newest kitchen staff that had just been hired dropped his platter, spilling the sliced beef across the floor. The man whipped around behind Jean and jerked the meat knife to the boy's throat. "No," the man cried out as if in pain. "You cannot marry him. Don't you know what he is? He is the scourge, the demon of destruction, a drinker of blood and bringer of pestilence."

Amelia screamed as the knife pushed hard enough to draw a long, thin line of blood from his neck and a terrified whimper from Jean. From the corner of her eye, she saw Grant move as the man dragged her brother from the chair.

"Stop, you demon! Do not come closer or I will kill him!"

"I know you. What do you want from us, William?" Grant asked. His voice rang with a cold echo that Amelia had never heard him use before. She took strength from his calmness. If anyone could handle this and get Jean safely from the madman, it was Grant. Amelia clasped her hands tightly to still their trembling.

"I want your soul sent back to hell." The man's hand wavered, scraping over Jean's neck.

"Fine. Release the boy and you can do your worst." Grant lifted his hands, showing he held no weapons, offering himself in exchange for Jean.

"Show yourself as you are. I want her to see you for the monster you are, so she can understand what must be. Show yourself! Show your demon body!" The man shook, spittle dripping from his mouth.

"How would you know what a demon looks like?" Grant's voice was quiet and full of threat.

"I saw you attack Claude. I saw you for the monster you are. I saw you and ran to get Pierre to help fight you off. Since I was fooled for so long, I know that the girl will have to see you to be convinced."

"Are you sure you want this? If you let the boy go now, I will let you walk from here." Grant stepped closer, but still made no moves of aggression.

"Damn you, demon, show yourself!" Not once did the man's knife leave Jean's throat. Jean seemed to realize his safety was out of his hands and sat still as a statue. Amelia, too, was frozen in place, her eyes and ears taking in the scene, while she desperately tried to draw breath past her terror.

The room darkened as the candles blew out and the shadows came alive around them. A buzzing vibration shook the house.

Amelia stepped back in surprise as she watched Grant change. His muscles bulked, doubling his width and ripping his clothing. His skin darkened in crawling blotches until it was black with intricate shadowy markings flowing down his arms. Large fangs grew from his thickening jaws as a set of long, curved, black horns emerged also and swept back through his silky hair. Exquisite, wretched black membraned wings fell from his shoulders like a tattered cape. Their silken sheen was at odds with the frayed looking edges. A long, forked tail flicked behind him.

She watched in fascination at the terrifying creature that Grant had become and could almost believe the man's accusations. Almost.

Grant was dark and forbidding.

Grant was beautiful and wicked.

\* \* \*

Grant was seriously pissed.

With three strides, he crossed the room, tearing the knife away from Jean's throat and throwing it with a resounding thud into the far wall. "You came here seeking to destroy me and you may well have done so, but you will pay well for your folly. Never again will you be free to darken my door." His voice was deep, dry and harsh. He easily lifted and held the man in the air, freeing Jean to run into Amelia's arms.



As always was the case, his true form filled him with strength and power.

And nearly overwhelming emotions, the most powerful right now a wild rage that he fought to control. Left loose, that same violent rage would tear this pitiful mortal's body to pieces.

The man did not struggle. The beast that was Grant pulled him close and sank long teeth into the tender throat.

Grant drank long and deep as he studied the man's mind and decided on a course of action. This man, William, was filled with anger and despair over his brother's lost mind, not realizing it should by now be restored. He would need a quiet place to forget what he thought he knew. William would go to Grant's farm in Scotland. He enjoyed working with animals and he would be watched closely there. He drank the thick blood until young William hung limply in his arms, unconscious. He carefully sealed the wound and laid the man on the floor.

Then he turned to face what he feared most. Amelia's eyes filled with fear or loathing. Surely his life with her was lost. If William thought to take his life, he may have succeeded. He would let Amelia leave and give her everything she might think to ask for and he would live on in a half life with no Amelia to share it.

But Amelia, as always, surprised him. She left her brother and walked to his side. She trembled, but was brave enough to offer her trust in him.

"Is he dead?"

"No." He couldn't help the growl of his voice, but he forced his body to hold still to keep from frightening her worse.

"I thought not." She reached out a tentative hand to touch him. He started to turn away but she stopped him. "Please wait, Grant. I want to see you as you are. I want to feel you." She feathered a finger lightly over his fragile looking wing. He obliged her by slowly extending it to its full six foot length. What at first appeared to be tears in the edges were delicate, intricate designs, detailing his mother's lineage. Amelia's fingers traced the design as he held completely still.

"You do not fear me?" he asked in his grating voice. Her touch flushed him with another overwhelming emotion, desire.

She met his glowing gaze and gently touched his heavy jaw. "How could I fear my heart? You have not hidden this from me and you are still my Grant."

"Dear Amelia, you are most astonishing." He pulled her into his arms and his head rested against hers as he fought for control and began to change back. "So will you still marry me?" It was too much to hope for even from his Wishling.

"Oh, yes. And I think Jean still approves also."

"Jean?" Grant asked, turning to the boy.

Amelia's young brother was sitting at the table munching on a slice of bread looking relatively unconcerned by all the action, but still watching them with interest. His eyes danced in happiness as he swallowed down a bite of food. "That was brilliant!" Jean paused. His face took on a serious look. "But sprouting wings like that must be real hard on clothing."

## **L. Shannon**

L. Shannon came into existence in June, 2004, when her long-time love of books found a new way of expressing itself. In the time Shannon doesn't spend writing or bothering her hubby, she shows dogs, gardens and watches over her Butterfly Koi ponds. Writing started off as a battle against insomnia and has steadily grown into a full fledged war against reality. L. Shannon's books are her way of diving from the mundane and swimming through the surreal waters of the paranormal.