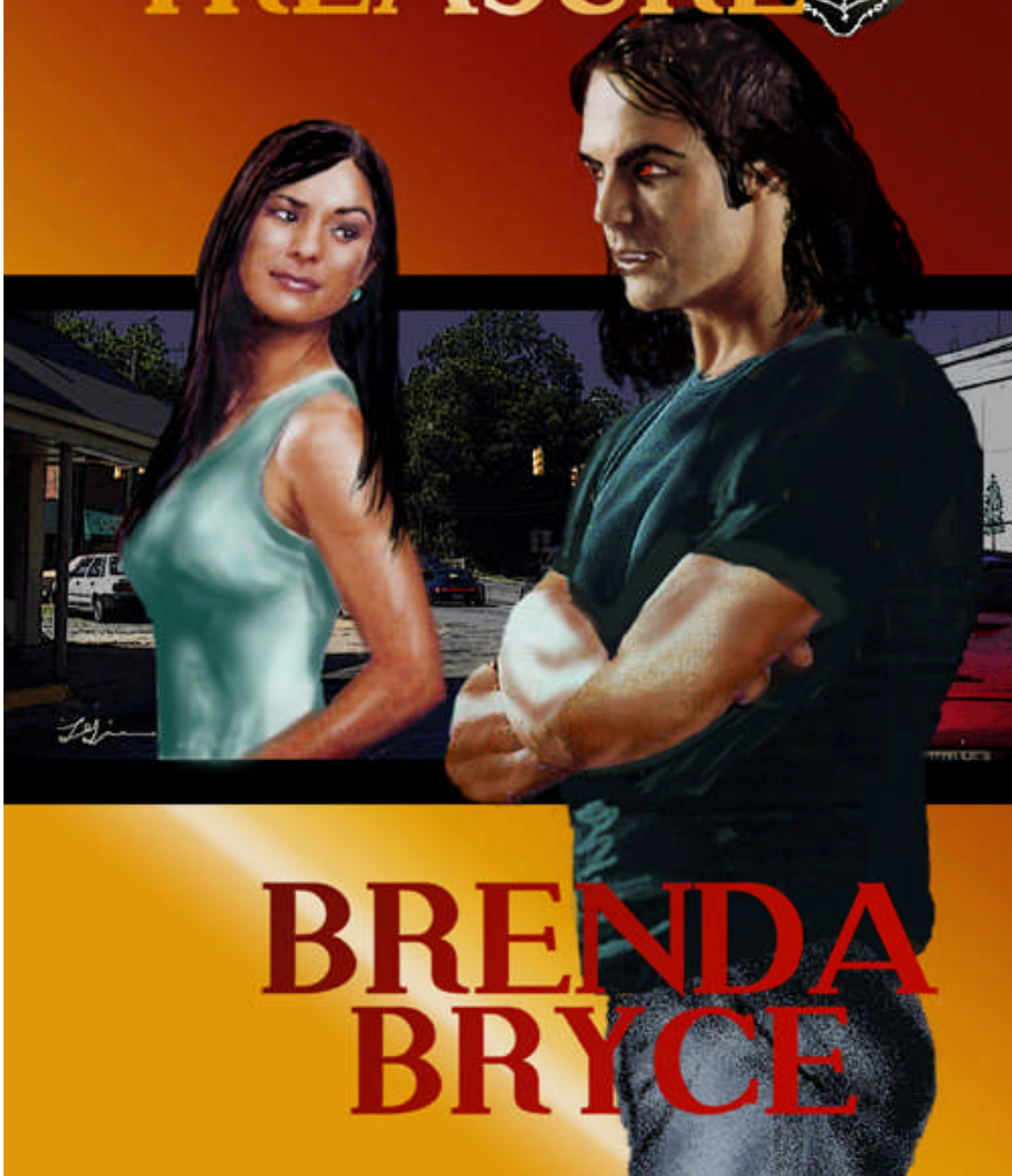


THE SOCIETY 2
**MIDAS'
TREASURE**

LoSeId



**BRENDA
BRYCE**

THE SOCIETY 2: MIDAS' TREASURE

Brenda Bryce

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Published by

Loose Id LLC

1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29

Carson City NV 89701-1215

www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 1-59632-191-1

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Sherri Lynne & Maryam Salim

Cover Artist: Laura Givens

Dedication

For the teens. Thanks for granting me the computer time.

Chapter One

The sun sank into the ocean as it did every evening, its fiery fingers stretching to touch the very old and rambling house that overlooked the ocean. The house couldn't be seen from the street, and the surrounding ivycovered walls measured ten feet high. Nearly hidden by the foliage, large, sharp spikes ran along the top of the wall, a strong deterrent to keep out inquisitive visitors. Passersby who chanced to look through the large, locked iron gates saw a sculptured lawn with a fountain and a circular driveway.

As the sun completed its immersion into the ocean, a disturbance came from within the silent house. Lights flickered on in various rooms, and soft music began to play.

He took a deep breath, and the curtains of his large canopy bed flew open. His eyes scanned the specially designed room that was deep within the bowels of the old house. Finding everything as it should be, he rose from the depths of the bed and, grabbing the clothing that sat neatly on the dresser, stalked across the floor to the only visible exit. A set of stairs led to a wall that gave way when he approached it. He passed through the house without looking left or right, pulling on the clothing, and when he reached the door to the outside, it opened for him.

Mykil stepped outside and took to the air, heading inland to feed. He needed blood.

Skimming above the tree line, he scented the air for a likely donor. The forest was bereft of humans, but a tendril of a scent caught his attention and his interest. Following the odor, he arrived at a small house on the edge of the forest.

The scent was strong, but hours old. The human wasn't home, but the succulent smell was wafting from the road that came from town, and growing stronger. Still intrigued by the aroma of the home's occupant, he decided to be patient and wait. His next meal was heading his way.

* * * * *

Aileen had enjoyed the movie. Still chuckling over the funniest parts of Adventures of the Soul, she gathered her belongings and put her trash in the overflowing receptacle. Waving a cheery goodnight to the regular cashier at the snack bar, she called out, "See you next week, Janice."

She liked the routine of her Friday nights. Eat dinner, catch a movie, walk home, and go to bed. Like clockwork.

Humming one of the songs from the movie soundtrack, she strolled toward her house, which wasn't far and was on the outskirts of town at the edge of the forest. Sometimes she got a little lonely, especially since hers was the only house in sight, but living surrounded by such beauty seemed well worth it.

Having all this natural beauty around her had also been good for her work. The forest, the ocean, and fields of grass were all within walking distance and perfect as the scenery in the children's books she wrote.

Aileen sighed. She had been worried about writer's burnout three months ago. Los Angeles was a crowded city, with all of its big-city distractions, and no matter how hard she'd tried, she hadn't been able to think of one happy ending for her stories. When the depression got so bad that she stopped smiling, she packed.

Thinking of how she'd found the scenic town she lived in now, she laughed. She'd unfolded the California map onto the table, closed her eyes, and pointed.

Once she arrived in Oceanview, she had stopped at the only realtor's office around and told them she wanted privacy. They'd shown her several places, but one house, sitting at the end of a secluded lane, with no neighbors, just fields of grass, wildflowers, and a small brook meandering throughout the property, caught her interest. She'd fallen for it immediately and had signed a rental agreement on the spot.

The house was small, only two bedrooms, one of which she had turned into an office. The living room and the kitchen were just large enough for her, but the best feature was the bathroom. It had a large, claw-foot tub bracketed with shelves. Her idea of heaven on earth after writing all day was spending an evening lounging in that tub full of bubbles, surrounded by scented candles and reading a book someone else had written. It hadn't taken her long to get settled and comfortable in her little house.

So, here she was, smiling again. More importantly, writing again. The last three months had been good for her.

Using the moon as her light, she looked in her purse for the house keys and walked up the stairs that led to the porch surrounding her house. As she reached the top step, she stopped. The moonlight didn't reach the porch.

“Ah-ha. There you are.” She gripped the elusive keys. Pulling them out of her purse, she looked up and froze. A man stood in front of her, blocking the door. In under a second, she was able to take in a lot of details. He was taller than she was, at least six foot three, and he towered over her as very few men did. He had long black hair, and despite his dark clothing and his position in the shadows, she could tell that he had well-developed muscles.

She started to take a step back, then noticed his eyes. They glowed a fiery red. My God, oh, my God! She couldn't even voice her fright.

Aileen turned and had taken a single step when he acted. It happened so quickly that she missed his movement. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back toward him, fitting her perfectly in the shadow of his body, back to front.

“No, no, no, no, no.” She finally voiced the only thought racing through her mind. As he lowered his mouth to her neck, she started to moan.

“Shh, don't be afraid; I won't hurt you,” he whispered into her ear.

Wrapping one arm firmly around her waist and the other around her chest, he pulled her in tightly. He kissed the pulse point on her neck softly, then bit down.

There was a pinch, and then extreme warmth penetrated the area as his teeth pierced her neck. While he drew deeply on the wound he had inflicted, Aileen felt tremendous fear ... and heat. Sexual heat, like nothing she had ever felt before. She moaned again at the white-hot flames shooting through her body. Electricity flowed from her neck to her sex. Never had she even imagined anything such as this.

She moaned again at the exquisite sensations zipping through her body. Her eyes closed and her knees sagged until he was the only thing holding her up. Then everything went black ...

Mykil became lost in the essence of the woman. She smelled of honeysuckle and popcorn, and tasted more exotic than any spice he could remember trying. In fact, she intoxicated him faster than any spirits ever distilled. He could feel her fear and excitement coming through the link he had established, but was unable to place her into a trance. Her mind pressed against his in retaliation. He fought her for dominance, and she was very strong.

When she drooped in his arms, he jerked in shock; he'd lost control and taken too much. Licking her neck to seal the wound, he felt for a pulse with his tongue. It was there, but very faint. He had to do something soon, or she would die.

Mykil gathered the woman into his arms and took to the air. Constantly monitoring her vital signs, the rise and fall of her chest and the slow beat of her heart, he flew to his house with all possible speed. Within moments, he landed at the front door, which opened with a thought. He hurried inside and into the nearest room, placing her carefully on the couch.

"You will survive, woman. I'll not have your death on my conscience. Do you hear me?" He hoped the sound of his voice would give her an anchor to hold on to.

He didn't know why this one woman seemed so important to him. Yet, the feeling persisted; he could not let her die.

As he stared down at her lying on the couch, he considered his options. Death he had already eliminated. The only other option was to give her a transfusion and blank her memory. Looking into her unconscious face, he felt his muscles tense; his cock hardened.

"Damn." He ran a hand through his long hair. It would probably be best just to give her the damn transfusion, but something told him not to. More than the irregular reactions his body was showing, there was something else. She would be something more. Something more to him. If he transfused her and sent her on her way, he would never know what that something could be. He had to find out why he felt this way before he decided. He hadn't sprouted a full blown hard-on in ... shit, about two hundred years!

Sitting at her hip on the couch, he closed his eyes and sent his mind seeking into hers. Immediately he felt it resonating like a beacon in her DNA. The gene! This woman has the gene. I have finally found her. She is mine! Elation slammed through his system as he realized he had located his mate. I have found her at long last, and she belongs to me.

Now that he knew, he had no time to waste. I won't lose her now. Not after waiting so long. It will have to be transformation. He reached around her shoulders with one arm and lifted her head. Fangs exploding into his mouth, he slashed a gaping wound in his other wrist.

Placing his bleeding wrist to her lips, he commanded, “Drink, woman; I want you to take in what I offer. You will live.”

The blood ran freely into her mouth. She had to swallow or choke. More blood filled her mouth, and the process repeated itself many times before he decided she’d had enough to initiate the transformation. He took his wrist away and sealed the wound. She still lay unconscious, so he picked her up once again and carried her down the hall to the library.

Entering the room, he walked across the plush carpet, reached behind one of the books, and pulled the lever hidden there. A section of the bookcase popped open on well-oiled hinges. He continued through the opening and pulled the bookcase closed behind him, then descended the stairs. Arriving at his destination, he crossed to his bed and gently placed her on the down comforter.

He looked down at her, wondering what to do next, and noticed her hair. She had it put up in some sort of bun, so he carefully removed the pins that held it in place and spread her hair across his pillow. It was extremely long; if she were standing, it would probably reach to her waist. It felt as soft as rabbit’s fur, and in the dim light of the room, it looked like dark chocolate. Her mouth was a little wide, but she had the fullest, most inviting bottom lip he had ever seen. High cheekbones and tanned skin demonstrated a Native American heritage. He didn’t know the color of her eyes; he hadn’t gotten a good look at them in the dark. Shaking his head at himself for wasting time, he bent down to remove her shoes and socks.

“She can’t possibly sleep comfortably in her clothes.” He carefully unbuttoned her blouse, sliding open the front panels and removing the shirt completely. “Gods,” he hissed. Mykil had never seen such beauty. A cream-colored lace bra that hid absolutely nothing from his sight covered her breasts. He reached behind her, unclasped the bra, and slid it off her. Groaning, he looked at her breasts again. They were perfect, full and round, with dark caramel-colored areolas. He dropped the bra when he noticed he had been twisting it in his hands. Breathing heavily, he reached for the button on her jeans.

Sure that he would go up in flames, he lowered the zipper and slid his hands inside her jeans -- and accidentally took off her panties as well. He knew he didn’t have enough self-control to replace the garment without making a fool of himself, so he gritted his teeth and pushed them down over her hips. He broke out in a sweat. I’m going to die. Right here, right now. Close to his breaking point, he hurriedly dragged the pants the rest of the way off her legs and carelessly threw them onto the floor. He had to get away from her and her

clothes, as quickly as possible. Jumping up from where he sat next to her on the bed, he crossed the room. Leaning heavily on the mantle over the fireplace for a few minutes, he tried to catch his breath and slow his heart rate. It didn't work, so he waited a few more minutes. He thought about baseball, that American game that was quite inferior to the civilized sport of cricket. He thought about the many businesses he ran -- quite well, if he did say so himself. He thought about his position as Midas within the Society, and where he could invest their money next.

Nothing worked.

Then he thought of how she would react when she woke. He immediately cooled off several degrees -- enough that he could go to his wardrobe and pull out one of his dress shirts. Mykil quickly tugged it over her head without unbuttoning it, and shoved her arms into the sleeves. Luckily, it was big enough that it slid right on. She's covered. Thank the gods. He raised her gently, pulled down the covers of the bed, and then laid her back down, covering her.

He went to one of the chairs and sat down heavily, running his sleeve across his forehead, wiping the sweat dripping into his eyes. Eight hundred and fifty-three years old and can't even undress an unconscious woman without getting a hard-on. Disgraceful!

He waved a shaking hand, and a crystal bottle floated toward him, followed closely by a long-stemmed wineglass. When they stopped in front of him, he grasped the bottle and removed the stopper. Pulling the glass out of the air, he poured the dark red liquid. Holding the bottle in one hand and the glass in the other, he guzzled the blood and refilled the glass. After practically inhaling the second serving, which replaced what he had lost to the woman, he set the bottle on the small table beside him and exhaled heavily.

"What a night." Mykil sighed. "And when she wakes up, there'll be eternity to pay. I think I'll sleep in." He knew it was a vain wish. He could stay awake all day as long as he had fed well. But if he slept, he would immediately come awake as soon as the sun set completely. He could wake the female when he woke if he wanted, but unless his motive was to intentionally wake her, she would sleep until one hour after sunset.

"Damn, damn, damn. And a shit thrown in for good measure." He smiled. Sometimes it felt good to curse.

Mykil glanced at the clock and knew the sun was rising. Sighing again, he stood. Slowly he went to the bed, looking down at the sleeping woman. "Sleep well, woman; we have a busy night ahead of us." Walking over to the wardrobe, he stripped out of his clothes, tossing them into the hamper. Naked, he strode toward the bed, rubbing his chest and yawning.

He climbed in next to his mate. "Good day, woman. I must remember to ask your name tomorrow." As he started to drift off, with his last breath he murmured, "Can't keep calling you 'woman.' If I hadn't gotten so distracted by the gene, I might have found it out sooner."

He exhaled. She exhaled with him. They slept.

* * * * *

The sun set on another day, and Mykil inhaled deeply. His eyes popped open. Something differed from the norm. Then he remembered. The woman.

He looked down at her still-sleeping form. "Good. Better get busy. Time's a-wasting; the early bird catches the worm; never put off until tomorrow what is better done today ..." He laughed, since he had been doing exactly the opposite.

Getting up, showering, and then dressing in blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and running shoes took him little time. He pulled his wet hair into a tail, then placed a band around it. He decided it would be safer to face her if he had fed well, so he left the house quickly.

It didn't take long to feed. The little town of Oceanview perched nearby, and as long as he didn't hurt anyone, no one noticed his eating proclivities or his nocturnal activities. He still didn't know what had gone wrong the night before when he drank too much from her, but he thought the presence of the gene might have been a contributing factor.

Mykil approached the local bar and mentally called one of the patrons outside. Guiding his prey into a shadowed alley, he tilted the man's head to one side and bit down on his exposed vein. He fed in total silence, then carefully ran his tongue across the wound, leaving only a small red patch similar to a hickey to mark his passing. Then he sent the man on his way with thoughts of a friendly conversation.

Returning to the house was demoralizing. He really didn't want to have the conversation he knew he faced.

“Well, damn.” He decided to go and get it over with. The sooner, the better. A stitch in time saves nine ... “Grr, I’m doing it again.”

He entered the house and went to the hidden room where his destiny waited. Taking a fortifying breath, he looked at the clock. Still a few minutes left until she would begin to wake, so he crossed the room to stand over the bed. He considered waking her, but settled on letting her wake herself. He wasted the last few minutes gathering her clothing, since he had simply tossed it aside the night before. He folded things neatly and placed them at the foot of the bed, then arranged her shoes to his satisfaction on the floor next to the bed.

He looked around the room to make sure it was tidy. It was well furnished; a fireplace filled one wall, and facing it, two comfortable-looking upholstered chairs separated by a small round table waited to be utilized.

Across the room stood a wardrobe and a large dresser. The fine craftsmanship on these pieces was obvious from the intricate hand carvings that showed wolves at the hunt. Separate scenes of the chase, capture, and kill spread over both the wardrobe and the dresser. A standing lamp gave added warmth to the room. He hoped she liked it.

She inhaled deeply. His nerves started to jangle. She moaned. His body stirred. He looked down at his pants -- “What the hell is this all about? Cut that out, all she did was moan.” -- and looked back at her. She opened her emerald-green eyes. He smiled what he thought was a rather nice smile. She screamed.

He tried reassuring her. “Wait, don’t do that. I won’t hurt you.”

She didn’t seem to believe him. “Where am I? Who are you? What’s going on?” She looked around frantically, saw the stairs, and rolled out of the bed. She hit the ground running.

Mykil stared, stunned. He had to calm her down, or she would never listen to him. Abruptly, he realized that he would have to catch her first. He cursed under his breath as he chased her down.

He caught her at the top of the stairs, trying to batter her way through the wall to the main part of the house. Grabbing her around the waist, he threw her over his shoulder and started back down the stairs.

The woman pounded on his back with both hands and kicked her legs frantically, so he wrapped his arm around her shins to hold her still. Her

screams came out in a rather staccato rhythm as her stomach bounced on his shoulder. When she ran out of breath, he felt her go lax and slide down his back a little.

“Now you’re being reasonable. We can talk, and if you’ll stay calm, we ...
AUGHHHH! YOU BIT ME!”

He tossed her onto the bed and rubbed his butt. “That hurt!”

“Let me out of here, or I’ll do worse!” Rolling to the far side of the bed, she bounced off, jumped to her feet, and got into a defensive crouch. She stared at him as if waiting for his next move. Possibly hoping for a mistake that she could take advantage of.

She looked scared, confused, and nauseous. Swaying slightly, she watched him carefully, then looked down and finally noticed what she wore. Or didn’t wear. “Oh, my God! You undressed me!” She looked down the inside of the shirt, eyes widening as she realized the shirt happened to be all she wore.

Still rubbing his abused butt, he grimaced. “Why did you bite me? I was only trying to get you to listen to me.” He shook his head, exasperated. “Women. Unreasonable, maniacal ... Look, will you hear me out? Please? I promise not to hurt you.”

“Right -- I walked in here on my own? I don’t think so.” She raised an eyebrow, giving him a sarcastic look. “How did I get here, who are you, what do you want, and where are my clothes?”

“I will answer all your questions, but wouldn’t you like to sit down?” He waved a hand toward the chairs.

“No.”

“Okay, we’ll stand.” Running a hand through his hair, he considered the best way to tell her what had transpired in the last twenty-four hours. “Right, well, hmm ...”

He glanced up at her and saw that she hadn’t moved. She still stared at him from a defensive crouch. “I am Mykil Votad. This is my home, which is on the other side of the forest from your house.” He began to pace, but stayed in front of the stairs so she couldn’t bolt again.

“I brought you here last night, and your clothes are on the bed.” He glanced up at her. “What else do you want to know?” He was still trying to avoid the point.

“What am I doing here?” She growled at him.

He winced. “This is where it gets difficult. Perhaps if I start at the beginning, I can make it more understandable.” He waved a hand at the stairs, then strode to one of the chairs and sat.

Like a bullet, she shot toward the stairs.

“I wouldn’t if I were --” Too late.

At top speed, she slammed into the nearly invisible barrier. Like a demolished building, she collapsed and landed hard on her back. When she tried to inhale, she emitted a noise that sounded a little like “eep.” He walked over and stood looking down at her.

He sighed, then asked, “Are you going to be reasonable and listen to me now? You can’t get out of this room. I fixed that. You’ll only continue to hurt yourself if you don’t calm down a little. Well?”

“EEP!”

She seemed to be struggling for breath and didn’t appear to be accomplishing it very well. She simply lay there repeating “EEP” at regular intervals.

“Umm, can you breathe?” he ask her, curious.

“EEP!”

“Guess not.” Reaching down with one hand, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her into a sitting position. “Can you breathe yet?”

Sucking in a large volume of oxygen, she turned pale, as if she might pass out. She shook her head and scooted away from him to brace her back against the nearest wall. Pulling up her knees, she crossed her arms over them, placed her head on her arms, then moaned. “I’m listening.”

He sure hoped so; otherwise they would still be having this same damn conversation next week.

“As I said before you took a header into my force field, my name is Mykil Votad. I am a vampire. Don’t give me that look. I am a vampire.”

She gave him a look of sheer skepticism anyway. So he extended his magnificent incisors.

“Great ... exactly what I needed ... What else can go wrong?”

“What was that? I think I misheard.”

What she said next sounded like: “Mumble, mumble, mumble.”

“If I may continue?” When she waved her hand, he resumed. “The beginning, right. Okay. About five thousand B.C., a race of people called the Sumerians lived in the area now known as Iraq. Their civilization collapsed around two thousand B.C., when they were summarily conquered by the Amorites.”

“Is this going to be a history lesson, or are you going to explain?”

“The history lesson is the explanation. As I was saying, the Sumerians were a highly intelligent race and had a written language that the Babylonians borrowed. They were also a highly religious people. Before the final collapse of their civilization, the priests prayed to the great gods of their religion for the long life of their people. Apparently, the gods Sin and Utu got really drunk and decided that the only way to save the Sumerian society was to make them immortal. As an added bonus, the deities decided it would be fun to make them nocturnal, as well as making them have to live by drinking blood. Didn’t they have a great sense of humor?”

“Oh, yeah, sure. Sounds like a real laugh-riot.”

“And for the best part, they made it so that the immortal males can only mate with a female with the Sumerian gene. The tricky part is that the immortal males first have to find such a female; then they have to make her an immortal. Since no females are born to immortal couples, a human woman must be found.” He shook his head at the enormity of the task.

“You can’t have sex before you find someone with the gene?” She looked and sounded appalled.

“No. We can have sex with anyone. However, we can’t turn or have children with someone who doesn’t have it.”

“Oh.”

“So, according to the old records, Utu and Sin answered the Sumerians’ prayers ... but in their own way. I am a descendant of the transformed Sumerians.”

He looked at her hopefully. “Do you understand now?”

“Yes, I understand,” she said, from the crook of her arm.

He smiled, glad that the conversation had reached its end.

“I understand that you are nuts!” She jumped to her feet and started to pace. “That story wouldn’t even get a reading if you sent it in to a publisher.”

His smile faded slowly. She was yelling, mumbling, and stomping around, and he decided to let her be. Maybe if she got it out of her system, she would calm down and listen to reason.

He sat in one of the chairs and watched the hem of the shirt brush across her ass. It was a mesmerizing movement. Swish to the left -- a little flash. Swish to the right -- a little peek. Shaking his head to break the spell, he looked into her flashing eyes. I really have to ask her name. She was still ranting. No, wait, she had begun to wind down ...

“What does all that have to do with me being here?”

“You have the Sumerian gene, and you are my mate.” Then he winced. Oops, could have handled that better.

“What do you mean, I’m your mate?” Her tone was calmer than he’d expected.

“Look, umm ... by the way, what is your name?”

She threw her hands up in the air and hollered, “I’m supposedly your mate, and you don’t even know my name! Great, just great! For any normal person, that would mean you don’t know me well enough for me to be your mate.” She made a humphing noise, then resumed her pacing and ranting. And swishing. It really was distracting.

“I think it would be a lot easier if I knew your name. That way I won’t have to run around saying ‘hey, you’ when I’m speaking to you.” Trying to be reasonable had started to wear thin.

The tone of his voice stopped her. Noticing the pinched lips and lowered brows, she realized that he hung on to his patience by a thread, and since he might conceivably be a crazy person and a kidnapper and had her locked somehow in this room with him, she clamped her lips shut, but couldn't help thinking her name.

His eyebrows practically hit his hairline. "Aileen Slipsworthy? Your family name is Slipsworthy?"

Frowning, she stopped pacing and looked at him. "Yes, Slipsworthy is my family name. So? How the hell did you find out? You said you didn't know it. Are you lying to me?"

He shook his head. "No, I got it out of your mind. Don't worry about that right now. Where was I, anyway? It's getting late."

"The 'I am your mate' stuff." She looked him over. While he seemed a little jumpy, he didn't actually look like he might harm her. She decided to keep her guard up anyway. Just in case. But if he said anything else remotely weird, she was going to snap.

"Right. You are my mate. I found you, and now that you've been turned ..."

"Wait. What do you mean, 'Now that you've been turned'?"

"Precisely that. Last night I turned you."

"Turned me into what?"

"A vampire, of course."

She went back over to the wall, slid down it, and resumed her previous position on the floor. This is getting to be too much. Even for a fantasy writer, it's too much. Definite snap time. "You made me a vampire?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You're my mate."

"Nuh-uh." Her witty comeback left a lot to be desired.

“Yes, Aileen, you are. You have the gene, and I found you. You’re my mate. I’ll not have it otherwise.”

Uh-oh, he sounds like he means it. “Okay, let me get this straight. You can only mate with some woman who has the Sumerian gene. You say I have this gene. Therefore, I must marry you. Oh, and don’t forget the important part -- you made me a vampire.” She tried valiantly to keep her freak-out to herself.

“Right.”

“‘Right,’ he says. How do I know what you say is true?”

He seemed to think about it, then went over to the wall opposite the bed and opened a section, revealing a refrigeration unit. Pulling out a pouch that sat on one of the shelves, he held it in his hand. He turned to her and asked, “Hungry?” then poked a small hole in the bag so that the dark red liquid slowly seeped out.

Fangs exploded in her mouth. She felt them pierce through her gums and reach her bottom lip. Strangely enough, it wasn’t really painful, more like getting a shot from the doctor. It stung momentarily, then seemed normal. Before she realized what she was doing, she had traversed the room, snatched the bag from his hand, pushed her new fangs into the bag, and sucked the blood into her mouth. It was cold, but tasted wonderful to her. Like the finest wine. The juiciest apple. Sweet.

After she emptied the contents completely, she looked down at the bag in horror, then let it slip through her fingers to the floor. She stared at it; her mind blank for a long moment. Then she looked up at Mykil.

“Change me back,” she softly ordered. “I want you to change me back, right now.”

Mykil looked into her eyes and sighed. “That, Aileen, I cannot do.”

Chapter Two

She seemed to contemplate all the information he had given her as she went over to one of the two chairs and sat down.

Mykil watched her, worried. She had been haranguing him since she woke, and he wondered if perhaps she was too quiet now. He went over to where she sat and noticed her shivering. Waving a hand, he lit a roaring blaze in the fireplace, then crossed to the wardrobe and got a blanket from the top shelf. Taking it to her, he tucked it around her tightly. She stared into the fire, saying nothing. He sat in the other chair and watched carefully for any sign of what she might do next. He didn't know what to look for, but figured he needed to be ready for anything. She hadn't even reacted to the way he'd lit the fire. She had so many conflicting thoughts, not settling long enough for him to be able to pick out any particular one, so he had to search for the signals.

"I can't be changed back," she said so quietly that if it hadn't been for his preternatural hearing, he wouldn't have even known she'd spoken. "Can I die?"

Sympathetically, he told her the truth. "You cannot become human again. But you can die. Direct light from the sun when it is at its zenith will fry you. Massive loss of blood from bad wounds will also kill. Not feeding can kill, as well, but slowly."

She looked over at him with sad eyes. "I want to go home now."

Hoping that it would help settle her, he gave in to her request. "We could do that. There are still several hours until dawn."

"Alone."

"No. I won't leave you unprotected. You may not want this, but you've acquired many new abilities that you must become proficient at. Otherwise you could get hurt."

"It doesn't matter," she replied softly. "I just want to go home now."

Aileen wouldn't give up the idea, so he retrieved her clothes from the bed. She put on her jeans, socks, and shoes. Blood stained her blouse, so she kept on the shirt she wore. She rolled up her own shirt, panties, and bra and tucked them into her back pocket. They hung out, but she didn't seem to be bothered by that. She ran a hand through her hair, but didn't ask for a brush to repair the damage.

Approaching the stairs, she stopped before she reached the shield blocking the door.

Not looking in his direction, she waited for him to join her.

Aileen wasn't taking this well, and he worried that she might do something rash. He would have to be extremely vigilant when it came to keeping an eye on her.

"I don't see anything, but I know something's there." She glanced back at him unhappily. "What is it made of? I can feel it on every inch of my exposed skin." She paused and rubbed her arms. "Does it have electricity running through it? The hairs on my arms are rising. It makes my skin crawl."

Being in her mind, he saw that she only goaded him in an attempt to get rid of him. Deeply implanted, hiding in a small corner of her thoughts, he found the idea that she would destroy herself if she couldn't become human again. Never! I will never let anything harm her, not even herself.

Barely refraining from grinding his teeth, he answered her question. "It's simply a thought. I visualize a translucent barrier covering the doorway and it happens. You've heard about the studies that say a human uses approximately ten percent of his brain? Vampires use around fifty-three percent. There've been some tests run which show that telekinesis, telepathy, shape-shifting, and other unexplained phenomena originate in the unused portions of the brain."

Mykil waved his hand and dispersed the barrier. "We of the vampire species think that's why we use so much more of our brains. We've tapped into some of the other portions in our own brains to be able to do the things we can." He escorted her up the stairs with a hand at the small of her back. Reaching the top of the stairs, he leaned around her and touched the switch to open the hidden door.

Curiously she asked, "You can do all these things? Shape-shift, move objects, and talk with your mind?"

"Yes, Aileen, and so can you, with practice." Hoping that contemplating the powers she'd acquired due to the transformation would keep her mind too busy to remember that she didn't want to finish out her existence as a vampire, he answered her questions openly. Mykil didn't plan on taking any chances with Aileen; he needed her for his own existence, because vampires mated for eternity. He didn't care if it seemed selfish. Since he'd already spent an eternity

alone and didn't plan to spend the rest of his existence that way, he would give her anything she needed to keep her happy and with him. Leaving him, in any shape or form, wasn't an option.

Deciding to wait until he had time to explain the different means of transportation that had become available to her, Mykil led her outside and onto the trail through the woods that led to her house. The path ambled around tall, thick trees that had been there for centuries. The ground, deeply covered with fallen leaves and broken branches, looked as if someone had laid a brown carpet along the path. Large ferns and giant pothos bloomed everywhere, as if tossed down like a child's abandoned building blocks.

"Okay, I understand what telekinesis and telepathy are, but you said you could shape-shift. What can you turn into?"

Mykil looked down at the top of her head, which happened to be all that he could see of her since she kept her eyes focused straight ahead. "What creature can you think of?"

Aileen laughed a little. "I'm a children's science fiction and fantasy writer. I can think of many fantastical creatures."

Mykil smiled. "What creatures have you written about?"

"I've written stories about dragons and knights with their horses. I've also written about goblins, trolls, unicorns, and even gargoyles. Writing children's fantasy gives me free rein to use my imagination. I've even made up a few of the characters that I've used." Smiling impishly up at him, she seemed to be daring him with her eyes to top her imagination.

Seeing the teasing sparkle in her eyes, he felt a stirring in his chest. It expanded exponentially with the width of her grin. A strange warmth encompassed his heart, and he absently rubbed his chest. Mykil didn't know what it could be, but since it didn't seem to be fatal to him, he ignored it.

"Basically, I can become any real, living creature. Mostly, I stick to wolves and birds of prey in this country."

She looked at him questioningly. "This country?"

He felt elation that she could now look at him, but kept all expression from his face, not wanting her to recall her anger and fear. "I have homes in many countries. I also have homes in various states."

As they continued on the path to her home, she teased him by naming some animals she could think of and asking him if he could turn into them. She asked about lions, tigers, and bears. Monkeys and mice. When she asked him if he could turn into an elephant, he laughed. He liked watching her when she smiled and acted carefree, although he knew her self-deception wouldn't last long, and she would probably return to a more unhappy state. Mykil now had an insight to how his mate would act when she was content.

They soon reached the end of the path in Aileen's backyard. They skirted the wicker lawn furniture lazily arranged near an old oak tree. Aileen had started to climb the stairs to go to the back door when she realized she couldn't get inside and why.

"Umm, my keys are in my purse. I need to go to the front of the house." Turning, she descended the steps and went around to the front. Looking on the ground, she found her purse right where she had dropped it the night before, although most of the items that had been inside her purse had fallen out.

Kneeling on the ground, she gathered up her belongings and retrieved her house keys. She stood and glanced at Mykil, who had followed her. "I'm fine now. Please go." Remembering the events of the night before had reminded her that she didn't like Mykil. For some reason it was getting harder to remember that she should be afraid of him and that she couldn't live under these circumstances.

Instead of answering her, he gently removed the keys from her hand, walked to the front door, and unlocked it. Reaching in, he felt for the light switch most houses have right inside the door. Finding one, he flipped on the lights in the living room, then leaned against the doorjamb, crossing his arms and ankles, and waited.

Feeling quite put upon, she stomped up the stairs. Brushing past him, she huffed her way into the house. After they entered her living room, Aileen crossed to the sofa and sat.

Mykil, having watched the small tantrum, followed her in and closed the door. Then he walked over to her and held out his hand.

Aileen looked up at him with a question in her eyes.

He casually reached toward her. She jerked back, but froze when all he touched was the purse that she still held crushed to her chest. He took the purse, laid it on the coffee table, and set her keys on top. Straightening, he walked to one wall and stared at the pictures that hung there. She needed the space and he seemed to be trying to give her some, but it didn't look as if he would leave her alone.

Aileen sat staring at Mykil's back, wondering what might happen next. Could this night get any weirder? Naturally, it could. There was a knock at the door.

Both of them looked at the door. He looked at Aileen, one eyebrow arched high. "Expecting someone?"

Aileen continued to stare at the door until a second knock sounded. A visitor at one in the morning? It wasn't the paperboy or a Girl Scout. They would be in bed, having angelic dreams. Maybe it was a werewolf or a vampire. Wait, she already had a vampire, didn't she? She couldn't think of any reason for someone to be knocking at her door so late, unless it was to make her day even more wonderful than it already was. She went to the door and opened it. Well, isn't this just peachy? Aileen shook her head as she looked into the really pissed-off face of her ex.

With a fierce look and a snarling voice, he began his complaints. "Do you know what I had to go through to find this rat-hole?" Without touching her, he barreled past her and entered her house. "I had to tell your damn agent that your father was dying, just to get an address."

Hearing a low growling sound, Aileen looked at Mykil. Boy, does he look mad. He placed himself between her and their unexpected visitor, and just stared at Troy menacingly. He obviously didn't like the situation, as he continued to growl low in his chest.

Aileen let her hand settle lightly at the center of his back, which seemed to distract him.

"Troy, what are you doing here?"

"You just up and disappeared, right when I was about to --" He broke off when he turned and noticed they weren't alone in the room. "Who's he?" Troy pointed at Mykil as if she couldn't have figured out who he meant.

She stepped around Mykil, not removing her hand, and asked Troy, “Why are you here so late? I wasn’t expecting you and ...” Shaking her head at her inane politeness, she started over. “Troy, what are you doing here?”

Glaring at each other, Mykil and Troy took each other’s measure. Instantaneous mutual hatred filled the room.

“Who is this guy, Aileen?” Troy was beginning to get on her nerves with the question.

Yes, who is this guy?

Looking between the two angry men, she introduced them. “Mykil Votad, Troy Carey.” Without taking her eyes off Troy, she explained the situation to Mykil. “Troy is ... I guess you could call him my ex-boyfriend. Troy became my ex five months ago. I dumped him after I came home from a tri-state book signing and found him in my apartment, in my bed, with his secretary. I didn’t appreciate him using my apartment because it was closer to his office. It was a good thing we hadn’t moved in together or, God forbid, gotten married.

Glaring into Troy’s eyes, she curled her lip in disgust. “I guess it was too much to have hoped you would go to a hotel to do your dirty work. At least then I wouldn’t have to change the sheets. That was gross, by the way. I still don’t know how you got into my apartment.”

“You didn’t let me explain.” Troy held up a placating hand.

“Why should I? I thought it was self-explanatory.” Waving dismissively, she continued her story. Anyway, I escorted them out -- half dressed -- and slammed the door behind them. Haven’t seen him since. I’d been enjoying it, really.” It wasn’t long after that episode that I got witer’s block. Getting rid of him and moving was the best damned thing I eve did. She shook her head sadly. Putting her hand on Mykil’s arm, she glanced between the two men. “Mykil is ... umm ... What are you, Mykil?” She grinned up at Mykil impishly, knowing the touch and the smile would tweak Troy’s surgically enhanced nose.

She felt Mykil relax slightly at her attitude. She wondered if he had noticed the apathy she felt toward Troy. That was all that was left of her feelings for him. However, her feelings for Mykil were harder to define. They were zinging across the scale. Fear, anger, and occasional twinges of sexual interest. She especially didn’t get the sexual interest part.

“Your future,” he stated positively.

She whacked him on the arm. “Future, shmuture. Troy, this is my ... friend, Mykil.”

Mykil snorted, but she thought he might be happy with her description. She could practically feel the satisfaction rolling off him.

Aileen could tell that Troy was not a happy camper. He didn’t like the idea of her having another man in her life. Tough. She was glad he was out of said life. Now to find out what he thought he was doing, coming here at one in the morning, hassling her, and upsetting her “friend.”

“Troy, for the last time, what are you doing here? I know it can’t be about my father. My parents have been dead for over three years.” She leaned into Mykil’s side as she made this declaration. She was getting some bad vibes from Troy, and without thought, looked to Mykil for protection.

Troy sneered when he saw her movement. Then schooled his face into a sad, remorseful look. “Aileen, sweetie, I missed you. I’ve been waiting hours and hours for you to come home, just because I needed to see you again.” Ignoring Mykil’s snort of disbelief, he went on. “I wanted to apologize and get back what we had together. I need you, baby.” Peeking at her, he seemed to be trying to gauge her reaction to his admission.

How long were you with this guy, baby? Does he really think you’re that gullible Have you tried you deensive stance on him, sweetie? Mykil sounded like he was having fun. It nearly made her smile.

Shush, you. He gave her a startled look, and she realized that he heard her. She didn’t have time to dwell on it just yet. “Troy, what do you want, and don’t tell me you want to get back together. It’s been five months, and suddenly you want to see me again. What do you really want?” Tired of dealing with him, she had started to lose her good mood.

His repentant look fading as fast as it had arrived, Troy snarled. “Money, I need money. And you’re gonna give it to me, or I’ll ruin your career. I’ll ruin your reputation so bad no self-respecting parent will buy one of your crappy books. I had to put up with you for months, working at getting into your good graces, and just when I was ready to get everything I deserve out of you, you throw me out. Me! As if that incident wasn’t all your fault. You can’t get rid of me like

that. Give me the money that I deserve, and I'll leave. Otherwise, you'll really pay."

Mykil took a menacing step forward and might have ripped the bastard's heart out, but Aileen started to laugh. She couldn't help it. She laughed harder when Mykil froze, then looked at her in astonishment.

Aileen wrapped her arms around her stomach and laughed until she got the hiccups. Troy and Mykil just stared at her, thoroughly confused. Trying to catch her breath, she looked over at Troy. "This is too funny. You remember my agent, Deborah, don't you, Troy?" She continued before he could answer. "She said you would pull something like this. That's probably why she told you where I am. She knows my parents are gone."

Casually, she walked over to the chair and sat down. Mykil looked as though he didn't know what might come next, but seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. He took up a position of protection behind the chair and put a hand on her shoulder as a show of support.

Troy looked completely baffled.

Thinking that if she told him the worst of it now, he would leave her alone, Aileen laid it on the table for him. "There's nothing you can do to me -- or say about me, for that matter -- that could hurt my career or reputation. Deborah has it set up so that, when you pull something like this, all I have to do is notify the local authorities that you're harassing me and you could go to jail. You see, after I told her about the wonderful incident -- in my own bed, mind you -- she went to my lawyer. He is really good. He got a restraining order filed against you, stating that you aren't allowed to come within one thousand feet of me. That means unless the building is huge, you can't even go to my book signings. Surely you know all this -- your signature was on the paperwork you were served with." She smiled sweetly at Troy.

Troy, shaking his head in rage, snapped at her. "You think I give a fuck about a restraining order? Fuck you! It don't mean shit! I set it up perfectly. You owe me, bitch!" Curling his fingers into claws, he moved toward her.

That was his big mistake. Mykil jumped over the chair, clearing it easily and grabbing Troy by the throat with one hand. Troy cried out fearfully as Mykil's eyes started to burn, his nails lengthening and his teeth extending. Troy most likely saw his own death in Mykil's eyes.

“Mykil, stop.”

Mykil turned so he could see Aileen. She smiled at him. “Let him go, Mykil, please. He isn’t worth it. We’ll call the cops and let them deal with him. It’s so much neater. And you won’t have him on your conscience.”

Mykil stared at her for a moment as the bloodlust faded. “I could easily get rid of this problem, dear heart. It wouldn’t bother my conscience at all.”

She stood and walked over to where Mykil had Troy suspended in the air. Cupping Mykil’s cheek with her soft hand, she looked into his eyes. “I don’t want his blood on your hands. I can feel what you’re feeling. It’s rolling off you in waves. You want to drain him.” She shuddered. “Yuck, no telling where he’s been. His blood is probably riddled with disease. Let him go. He isn’t worth it.”

Mykil searched deeply in her mind for a reason to let the slime live. He found it. It was the small spark of feeling she had labeled under “Mykil.” As he watched, the feeling started to grow. She would rather not have Troy touch her life in any way. If Mykil killed him, as he deserved, Troy would always be there. Festering. Whereas, if Troy lived, he could be easily forgotten.

The small spark of feeling that she had for Mykil grew at a steady pace. Because he had protected her, which no man other than her father had done before, she looked at him with new eyes. She wasn’t afraid of him, and that was very important to him. If she didn’t fear him while at his most fierce, they had a chance.

Tearing his attention off Aileen, he returned his gaze to Troy. As the glow of his eyes dampened and his nails and teeth retreated, he considered what he would do. Staring into Troy’s eyes, he removed the memory of what had happened after Mykil jumped the chair. He implanted the memory of a really pissed-off Mykil grabbing Troy by the shirt and giving him a thundering right hook.

Just to make it more authentic, he grabbed Troy by the shirt and smashed his right fist into Troy’s face.

Troy flew across the room and crashed into the wall. Gracelessly, he slid down the wall and collapsed on the floor in a heap of broken, bleeding, unconscious humanity.

Mykil turned to Aileen. “Call the cops before I change my mind, love.”

Aileen stretched up, planted a fleeting kiss of thanks on his lips, and started to turn away. Mykil reached around her waist with one arm and pulled her flush with his body. When she looked at him questioningly, he tightened his arm and lowered his mouth to hers.

Chapter Three

His mouth felt warm as he softly rubbed his lips back and forth across hers. Aileen could feel all the blood in her body pool in her lower abdomen. Holy moly. Never had just the touch of a man's lips on hers set her on fire before.

She slid her hands up his chest, around his neck, and ran her fingers through his long black hair, pulling it out of the band that held it. Aileen felt herself press closer to Mykil, as if she would like to climb inside of him. Needing to be a part of him, she opened her lips and invited him to deepen the kiss. He wasted no time in granting her request. He gently licked her bottom lip, then sucked it into his mouth. Nipped it with his sharp teeth, then soothed the sting with a soft flick of his tongue. When she touched the place on her lip with her own tongue, Mykil took it into his mouth and licked it with his own. She went nuclear. Groaning with pleasure, she deepened the kiss and tasted him back.

Mykil was going to explode. He had to have her. Now. He ran one hand under her shirt, touching the soft skin of her back as he pulled her closer to him. He could feel her taut nipples against his chest and growled deep in his throat. Feeling her shiver in appreciation, he growled again, just so he could feel her rubbing her body against his.

Lost in the kiss, they jumped when they heard a groan that didn't come from either of them. Troy! They had forgotten about him.

Aileen pulled her head back and looked into Mykil's eyes. Blinking once, she took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled heavily. She started to say something, then had to clear her throat when all that came out was a squeak. "I have to call the police. Troy."

"Police, right. Go ahead." Mykil tried to pull himself together.

It was difficult because his brain had scrambled and his pulse leapt off the chart.

"I'll just ..." She gestured toward the phone. "Umm, call the, uhh ... police now."

"Right. Do that. I'll ..." Mykil looked around in confusion. "I'll take care of Troy."

As Aileen made the call, Mykil picked Troy up by the collar of his jacket and hauled him to the couch. Shoving Troy hard onto one end of it gave Mykil some added malicious pleasure. Have to get in what little fun I can while she isn't looking and before the police come.

Quickly concluding the call, Aileen turned to Mykil, "They're on their way." She glanced at Troy, who bled profusely from his newly broken and extremely off-center nose. She glanced Mykil's way and lifted her eyebrows. So much for the money he spent on the cosmetic surgery.

He chuckled at her dark humor.

"If I get him an ice pack, will you put it on him?"

He nodded, and she went into the kitchen. When she returned, she had a baggie full of ice wrapped up in an old dishtowel. Handing it to him, she frowned at Troy. "I don't want him bleeding on my furniture."

"Right." Mykil placed the ice pack onto Troy's face, smirking a little when Troy instantly woke from his swoon.

"Dahmmmit! Whad you do to me? I dink you broke my dose. Bassard, you're gonna pay! Augggghhhh!" He let out a screech when Mykil pushed the ice pack just a little bit harder onto his nose.

In the distance they could hear approaching sirens. Being a small town, nothing exciting ever happened. Naturally, the call about a restraining-order violator turned into a report of a "mad stalker type," which caught the attention of every one of the town's police, fire, and medical personnel who happened to be on duty. When Aileen opened the door, there were two paramedics in the ambulance, five firefighters in the only fire truck, and four police officers in two police cars -- Oceanview's entire fleet of emergency vehicles. The entourage completely filled her driveway. They were informed that the doctor and nurse were on standby at the clinic. Mykil wondered if the local gossipmonger was already on the phone.

The Oceanview emergency personnel filed into the house, took one look around, and started talking at once. The noise was deafening. The cacophony was enough that Aileen covered her ears with her hands to try to block it out.

Mykil instantly noticed her distress and threw the icepack that he still held onto the coffee table, then went directly to her. Wrapping his arms around her

shoulders, he pulled her head against his chest. He then stated, quietly but firmly, “Enough.” Instant silence. Only Aileen’s sigh of relief could be heard.

Mykil pointed toward Troy, who still sat on the couch. “There is the man you’ve come to arrest. He has a broken nose. Take care of it.”

The paramedics went to a newly whining Troy and looked over the situation. The more experienced paramedic grasped Troy’s off-center nose and gave it a yank.

“AUUUGGHHH!” He started hollering about suing everyone in sight. Mykil thought he should be grateful instead; his nose looked to be straight once again. The paramedics strapped him onto the stretcher and trundled him off to the clinic. Two of the police officers accompanied them out. They would take Troy off the doctor’s hands when the medical examination was finished.

After sadly determining that their help wasn’t needed, the fire personnel left. In a determined attempt to cheer themselves up on the way back to the station, they ran the siren and the lights. Mykil smiled. At least they got some enjoyment out of this farce.

That left two police officers with Mykil and Aileen.

Mykil walked Aileen to the sofa and sat with her in his lap. He continued to cradle her against his chest, not yet ready to lose the contentment flowing through him. Since she seemed to be comfortable, he decided to leave her where she was and settled against the back of the couch.

The police officers were both male. The first, tall and thin; the second, short and round. A “Laurel and Hardy Under the Badge” scenario occurred to Mykil. Tall and thin pulled out a notebook and a pen. “My name is Peter Thompson. My partner is Wilson Albermyrel. We have a couple of questions we need answers to. Okay?”

Mykil tightened his hold on Aileen and looked down at her. Her face was pressed tightly into his chest. Touching a curved finger under her chin, he raised her head so he could look into her eyes. Do you wish me to send them away?

No, let’s get it over with. She had gotten pretty good at communicating with her mind. It’s easier with you touching me. You’re ... comfortable to be around.

He smiled at her thoughts. Comfortable? Me?

Aileen shook her head at him. Her good spirits restored, she turned to the officers.

“I’ll answer your questions. Please, go ahead.”

“All right, Ms. ...” Thompson paused for her to fill in the blank.

“My name is Aileen Slipsworthy.”

“Right.” He wrote her name and address in his notebook, then took Mykil’s information. Looking back to Aileen, he asked, “Could you tell me exactly what happened here tonight?”

As Aileen told Officer Thompson the pertinent details concerning their evening with Troy and how to get in touch with her agent and lawyer to verify a few of the more interesting details, Mykil studied Aileen.

The long night had begun to wear on her. She was newly transformed and hadn’t truly fed. Her skin had started to grow pale. He needed to get her home. Knowing the fight he would have on his hands for that, he had to start his persuasion tactics soon. Dawn was only a few hours away, and knowing his new mate, he would need every second.

Having asked all the appropriate questions and gotten satisfactory answers, Thompson closed his notebook and put it away. He informed Aileen that he would be in touch with her agent and lawyer. “You’ll need to sign a complaint against Mr. Carey and a statement concerning tonight. You can come by the station in the next couple of days and take care of that. Also, bring a copy of the restraining order. Won’t bother you with it tonight, but don’t forget it. Will I be able to reach you here if we have any further questions?” Thompson asked.

“Yes.”

“No. She’ll be staying with me.”

Aileen glared at Mykil. “What do you mean, I’m staying with you? No, I’m not. I’ll be here.”

Mykil looked at Thompson. “She’ll be staying at my home.”

Thompson stared into Mykil's eyes for a moment. "Right. We'll be in touch." He collected his silent partner and closed the front door behind them.

Aileen jerked herself out of Mykil's arms and stood. "What are you up to now?"

"You'll need to stay with me, Aileen. At least until you can take care of yourself."

"I've been taking care of myself for years. Why would I need you to do it now?" Placing her hands on her hips, she continued to scowl down at him.

"Dear heart, remember? You're now a vampire, and there are things you need to know that only I can teach you," he reminded her softly.

Her hands slipped from her hips to wrap around her waist. "Oh, right. I sort of forgot about that."

"Go pack a bag. We have to be going; it'll be dawn soon." Not about to let this downtrodden attitude continue, Mykil stood and took her by her arm. "Which way to your room?" He was hoping to get a rise out of her. He got one.

"Who the hell do you think you are? You think you can come in here and run my life? Well, you can't. You say that you're a vampire and that you've turned me into one, too, but darn it ... I don't think I can handle this." Running out of steam, she quietly asked, "What am I going to do?"

Wrapping his arms around her, he hugged her close. "Go pack a bag and come home with me for now." Looking down into her eyes, he tried to make it better for her. "Tomorrow, I'll start lessons on what you need to know to survive, and we'll go from there. Okay?"

When she didn't answer him for a long moment, just stared at his mouth dazedly, he wondered smugly if he had fried her brain cells. He liked the idea of causing her to lose control. He would have given her what she practically begged him for, but time was passing. Packing time. Not kissing time.

"Aileen?"

"Umm, yes?" she asked blearily, seemingly lost in her thoughts.

"Are you going to go pack a bag now?"

“A bag? Oh, right, a bag. To go to your house.” She shook herself out of her stupor. “I’ll be right back.”

She went into her room and turned on the light. Mykil followed her out of curiosity. It was a feminine room. Frilly. Lots of knick-knacks on the surfaces. He noticed a theme. Wizards and dragons, unicorns and crystal balls predominated in the decor. Werewolves and mummies lined the walls and dresser. He could even see statuettes of vampires. Her bed was covered with the night sky. At the foot of her bed sat a wooden chest with a dragon carved into it. Aileen truly had a love for anything magical or mythical. Good.

While Mykil examined her room, Aileen went over to the closet and knelt on the floor. Shoving aside a box of Christmas ornaments, she dug out a suitcase and took it to the bed. Leaving the opened case sitting at the foot of her bed, she went to the dresser. Opening and closing drawers, Aileen pulled out a variety of shorts, T-shirts, and socks and placed them into the suitcase. Returning to the dresser, she opened a drawer that contained a rainbow of undergarments. The contents of the drawer caught Mykil’s attention. With one eye on Aileen, he sidled toward the dresser to satisfy his curiosity.

Aileen, not paying him any attention, got out the items she wanted and put them into the suitcase as well, then went to the closet.

Mykil, unable to help himself, glanced at Aileen rooting around in the closet, pulling out jeans and tops. He nonchalantly slid open the dresser drawer that contained the tantalizingly feminine underwear and, ever so casually, reached inside. He could just feel something soft when ...

“Mykil?”

SLAM! “OUCH!”

Mykil was leaning casually against her dresser with his ankles crossed and one hand on his waist by the time she looked up at him. He had the first two fingers of his other hand in his mouth. He tried sucking on the abused digits to take the sting out of them.

“Are you okay? You look strange.”

He removed his fingers from his mouth, “Fine, fine. I’m just fine ... Uhh, did you need something?”

She gave him a squint-eyed look, as if she knew he was up to something, but didn't know what. Shrugging, she asked him, "How long am I going to be staying with you? I need to know if I should bring my writing materials."

"By all means, bring them."

"Do you have a computer that I may use?"

"There are several computers in my house. You're welcome to use any of them."

She nodded, went into her office, and turned on her computer. While she backed up her work onto CDs, he wandered around the room. He found a shelf filled with children's books that all had Aileen's name on them. Mykil pulled one at random off the shelf and opened it.

She finished at the computer and turned it off, stacking the CDs into a carrying case. He looked up from the book and smiled at her, then turned it toward her. He showed her a picture of the witch, the main character in that particular story that he had been looking at.

"Aileen, this is wonderful. You truly know how to tell a story and to capture the imagination. The characters are so real, but not at all scary. Wonderful."

"I try to make a story that is for the youngest children. Witches, dragons, and the like are always depicted as frightening and give the littlest child nightmares. I want to get rid of the nightmares and make them smile. Hopefully, I succeed."

"I'm sure you do. May I bring some of your stories along?"

He looked at her with such a hopeful expression, she had to agree to his request. Leaving him to it, she went to finish her packing. Collecting her toiletries and a nightgown from the bathroom, she put the rest of the items in the suitcase and closed it.

Aileen pulled the full suitcase off the bed, and Mykil walked back into the bedroom, his arms filled to overflowing with her books. "Do you have another suitcase that I can put these in?" She could only grin at his gluttony.

Returning to the closet, she removed another bag and carried it to the bed. "Did you leave any of my books on the shelf?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't decide on just a few." Quickly, he filled the suitcase with the books and closed it. He collected both suitcases and turned to Aileen. "Do you have everything?" When she gave him a nod, he went on. "We must be going now." While he spoke, he headed for the door.

Aileen laughed lightly, wondering what had lit such a fire under him, then followed him out of the bedroom, shaking her head. "Just let me get my purse and my house keys and we can leave."

Doing just that, she looked around the house to make sure all the lights had been turned off and then followed Mykil out the front door, locking it behind her.

Mykil waited at the bottom of the steps for her. When she caught up with him, he asked, "All set?"

"I guess so. Let's go."

They set off around to the back of the house, through the yard, and onto the path through the woods.

She couldn't pinpoint exactly how he had convinced her to stay with him, but decided that since she was now on her way, to just follow his lead for awhile. Just to see where she ended up. Normally, she wasn't such a pushover, but these could be termed extreme circumstances. She had never met a vampire before, and she sure had certainly never been a vampire before.

It seemed strange that she didn't feel any different. She had noticed she could hear better when Oceanview's emergency personnel had all been talking at once. Now, as she looked around the woods, she also noticed that her eyesight was remarkably better. She could see all sorts of wildlife skittering among the dead leaves and brush. The woods looked as bright as day to her, although she knew that it must be very dark. Looking up at the sky, she saw the quarter moon. Not much light coming from that.

Aileen was quite curious about these new capabilities. Everything looked so new. Different.

He hurried her along the path, and they soon arrived at his home. He closed and locked the front door behind them, then led her through the foyer and past an open door. It was the library.

Jerking to a stop, she looked around quickly. This room was a literate person's heaven. The walls of the large room had been covered from the floor to the eighteen-foot ceiling with shelves. Every inch was full of books of every sort, leather-bound ancient texts and first editions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction and nonfiction. There were books on every topic imaginable, from automobile maintenance to zoological studies. Oh, to be able to lose herself in this room!

Mykil didn't let her linger; he bypassed the books with barely a glance. He strode over to the far wall and set one suitcase on the floor. Reaching behind the books on one of the shelves, he did something she couldn't make out. She didn't think he hid it from her, only that she stood too far behind him to see. One side of the bookcase silently slid forward, and Mykil pulled it open even more. It revealed a stairway that looked familiar.

"Mykil? Where are you going?" she asked tentatively. Remembered fear coursed through her system and made her nervous.

"I'm taking you to the safest room in the house, Aileen. Come, nothing will harm you." He picked up the suitcase and waited for her to step inside the stairwell.

Taking a deep breath, she slid past him and went down the stairs. Mykil followed her in and pulled the wall closed behind them. Startled, she jumped at the small click. Bravely, she continued descending the stairs. It reminded Aileen of Persephone descending into Hades' underworld realm.

Aileen heard an odd noise, reached the bottom of the stairway, then turned to Mykil. "Did you just snort?"

"Who, me?" he innocently inquired of her as he crossed to the wardrobe. "Would you like me to help you unpack?" Mykil set the suitcases on the floor and turned to her. "You may use any of the drawers or closets. Ask, and I will empty whichever you choose. Also, there is a bathroom through this door where you can put your things."

He touched a portion of the wall. To her astonishment, it opened, revealing a hidden room. It was indeed a bathroom. The room, decorated all in black marble, looked enormous. A Jacuzzi tub, big enough to hold a small family, took up one whole side. Along one wall were double sinks with gold-trimmed green fixtures, and along another wall stood a shower stall that had three

showerheads. Never had she seen a bathroom that she would seriously consider living in, until now.

She noticed only one anomaly. There was no commode.

With raised eyebrows, she looked at Mykil. His eyes twinkled. “Why have an unnecessary item in the bathroom?”

A light went on over her head. “Vampires don’t ...”

“No. Our metabolism finds it unnecessary. We process everything we take in.”

“Oh.” Red-faced, she decided to let the matter drop and left the bathroom. “Why have you hidden all the doors?”

“Aesthetics. I hated the look of doors all over the place. Besides, living below ground, I wanted a beautiful place to stay. I didn’t wish to feel as if I were descending into Hell.”

Angela looked at him sharply, but he continued.

“The accesses to the adjoining rooms are easy to find. If you go around the room, you’ll notice the sconces mounted on the walls. One foot to the right of each sconce, you’ll find an entrance to another room. Go ahead and give it a try. What’s mine is yours.” He bowed low and held out one hand in an invitation to explore.

Placing her purse on the dresser, she walked to an elaborate candleholder on the other side of the room. Stepping one foot to the right of it, she stretched out her hand. Glancing over her shoulder at Mykil, she noticed that he watched her closely with hot, hungry eyes. Not yet ready to deal with what she saw there, she turned back to the wall and touched it. A section of it opened just a little, so she put her fingers into the gap and pulled the wall toward her.

Gasping, she entered the room. It was a treasure trove of personal belongings, dating back a couple hundred years. Spanish-style clothing from colonial days hung in one wardrobe, along with a conquistador’s suit of armor. In another wardrobe, she found suits of every style imaginable and men’s shoes in shoetrees along the side. Hats, ties, shirts, gloves, and even walking sticks were stored in this room. Everything the well-dressed man wore during the last two hundred years or so.

Aileen could spend hours examining the items in this room. It was like walking through a museum. He had personal items such as pocket watches, snuffboxes, and several gold-and-green embossed cards. She had read about these items in books, but had never actually seen them.

“What a wonderful room, Mykil. Are all the rooms like this one, treasure troves of memorabilia?”

“Not like this one. These are my personal effects from the times I lived in this house. All except the armor. I took that off a murderer. As time went by, I put away the things that went out of fashion and purchased new things. Sometimes, I come in here to remember eras gone by.”

“It’s like having your own historical catalogue, I suppose.”

“Sort of. Would you like to see another room now?” Mykil escorted her out of the storage room and closed the panel.

“Actually, I’m getting tired. I’d like to take a shower and get some sleep, if you don’t mind. I’m sure I’ll have time to check out the other rooms another time.”

“I don’t mind at all. There are towels and anything else you might need in the bathroom. Do you remember which scone it’s near?”

“Yes, I think so.” She went over to the candleholder that was near the wardrobe and pushed on the wall to the right. “Yup, this is it.” Gathering the suitcase with her clothes, she took it into the bathroom and glanced at him. “Where will I be sleeping?”

Mykil, who had gone over to the fireplace to light it, pointed to the canopy bed. “There.”

“And where will you be sleeping?” She turned until she faced him completely.

“Same place.”

“No, you are not.” She crossed her arms and glared at him.

Mykil sighed. “Aileen, there’s only one bed down here, and there’s plenty of room on it for both of us.” He held his hand up to forestall her upcoming argument. “You don’t have to worry. I won’t touch you until you’re ready. I promise.”

“Why do I have to stay down here?”

“If the sunlight touches you, you’ll die. Painfully. This is the only room in my house that I know that no sunlight will enter. Naturally, you’ll stay here. I’ll hear no arguments.”

Aileen watched the look that crossed his face when he made his declaration. Without saying a word, she went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Chapter Four

Mykil knew Aileen needed to feed, he also knew that she wasn't ready for the reality of the procurement. She only had two choices. Consume refrigerated blood, which wasn't the healthiest choice, or hunt for prey. He had heard that feeding off a mate could be sexually fulfilling, but not nutritionally sufficient. No matter what, she still needed to learn to hunt.

"Damn, they really need to put out a manual titled *The Care And Feeding Of Your New Mate*." He laughed. Then looked around guiltily, knowing instinctively that Aileen wouldn't be happy with him if she could hear him. He was still worried that she had heard him listening to her thoughts of being Persephone entering Hades. He had nearly choked to death wondering if that made him the devil, and had tried to stifle his laughter. She had still called him on it.

Luckily, she was still in the bathroom and didn't have mind-reading down pat yet. He breathed a relieved sigh. He was going to have to get out of the habit of talking aloud to himself, too. Now that he thought about it, he would have to monitor his louder thoughts, as well. He didn't want her mad at him. Hell, they hadn't even consummated their mating; he didn't want to spend eternity on the couch for an errant thought.

Laughing at himself, he considered how much fun it'd be having a mate. He had a playful nature, but without anyone to share a tease or a joke with, he'd turned into a rather staid fellow. Living life just feeding, sleeping, and running a business, day in and day out, would put anyone in a rut. The occasional visits from Johann and Alexi, vampires who had been friends with Mykil for centuries, had been the only real relief from boredom.

Sure, he had Jonsie and Bardell, but over time, they had become family, and no matter how much he tried to get them to relax, they took caring for him seriously. They weren't exactly friends, more like nurturing, parental types. "Oh, no, I forgot about that. I have to tell them about Aileen before tomorrow night." He put his head in his hands, trying to think of all the things he needed to do now that he had a mate.

Aileen stood at the sink and examined herself in the large mirror that spanned one whole wall of the bathroom. She decided that she looked a little pale, but not any different than before. She had difficulty believing everything that Mykil said to be true. According to the stories, she shouldn't even have a reflection. Nevertheless, there she stood, staring back at herself with her hair

sticking out in all directions. It looked rather like a rat's nest. Too bad -- now would be the perfect time not to have a reflection. She made a face at herself and reached for her suitcase.

Looking around for a place to set it, she realized that she could think of one good reason to have a commode even if you didn't need it. Instead, she placed the heavy bag on one of the two sinks and opened it. Reaching in, she pulled out her wide-toothed comb. It was a chore having such long hair, waist-length and full-bodied, but it was her one real vanity. Combing it was a pain, though. Nevertheless, she set to it. She would never get it clean if it stayed full of knots.

It took a while, but she finally got out all the snarls. She set the comb on the counter and grabbed an alligator clip. Removing her clothes, she found the forgotten shirt and bra in her jeans pocket. She put all the clothes in one pile, then looked in the cabinets and found a couple of plush towels. Black, of course. She hung them on the towel rack and put the clip within reach in the shower.

Washing her hair, she inhaled the fragrance of Mykil's shampoo. Heavenly. It smelled like the outdoors. Flowers and fruits. Normally, men didn't go for flowery fragrances, but apparently machismo wasn't a problem for him. She tried to picture someone calling him a wuss. She laughed so hard, she got soap in her eye. OwOwOw!

Deciding it would probably be better if she just concentrated on her showering, she rinsed her hair. Afterward, she wrapped it into a giant bun and secured it in the alligator clip, then continued washing her body.

She lathered her hands with soap and ran them soothingly over her body. She felt the tingling immediately. Her skin was so sensitive. It must be from the transformation Mykil told me about. If I actually believe him. I wish I knew. She admitted to herself that the bag of blood was probably all the proof she really needed, but it was so unbelievable.

Picturing Mykil in her mind, she ran her hands over her body. "Ah!" Instantaneous ripples from breast to groin.

"Oh, boy. This can't be good." It seemed Mykil was the key to her hormones. "Not good at all."

Unable to resist, she ran her hands down her stomach and combed her fingers through her pubic hair. While sustaining a mental image of a man she wasn't

sure she liked, much less wanted sexually, she slid her fingers down and touched the bundle of nerves there. Her body jerked at the contact, and she moaned softly. She imagined masculine fingers instead of her own, touching her, sliding through the velvet folds, pushing back the hood covering the very sensitive and swollen clitoris.

Aileen groaned louder. The hair all over her body rose, and sparkles of electricity tickled along her nerve endings. Oh, it felt so good. Would he touch her just so, softly? Or would he be forceful? She'd read books about all the different ways men took women, from the vanilla, missionary position, to the risqué, painfully pleasurable ways. She had never physically been with a man, but that hadn't kept her from dreaming, and experimenting on herself.

Thoughts of having sex with Mykil almost tipped her over the edge into climax. So deep into the fantasy was she, she could literally feel his strong, rough fingers touching her. Oh, God. He's freaking beautiful. And strong. And so damned sure of himself. He's probably a god in bed. Augh!

The orgasm ripped through her body, uncontrolled and physically draining.

One hand pressed to the wall of the shower to hold herself upright, she continued to rub her clit for several seconds, riding out the storm.

Just as she was able to take a deep breath and stand upright, a knock sounded at the bathroom door, causing her to squeak in fright.

"Aileen? Are you all right in there? I heard you shout." Mykil's voice sounded muffled.

"Ah, I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute." She shook her head to clear out the cotton and hurried through the rest of her shower.

Stepping out of the shower, she quickly dried off and put on her full-length nightgown. She hoped it would be a deterrent to Mykil. With him calling her his mate all the time, she wasn't sure what to expect. Oh, sure, she found him extremely attractive, and his kiss about blew her head clean off, not to mention that he had just starred in her own self-induced orgasm, but she wasn't ready to jump into bed and have indiscriminate sex with him or anyone else.

As she pulled out the alligator clip and wrapped a towel around her hair to remove some of the water, she heard his voice in her head laughingly asking, "Indiscriminate? I have never considered having indiscriminate sex with you,

dear heart. Scriminate maybe, but not indiscriminate. She could hear his laughter through the door.

I don't think scriminate is a word. And get out of my head. She answered him automatically. For a single moment, she wondered if he had caught her shower fantasy. Shaking her head, she decided that he couldn't have. He'd have been unable to refrain from commenting on it. Or at least wanting to help.

Looking into the mirror, she studied her reflection carefully as she combed and braided her hair. She was smiling, which she thought mightily strange considering the night she'd had. Mykil reminded her of a puppy, and Aileen had a hard time resisting his playfulness.

Placing her comb on the sink counter, she wondered what to do with her dirty clothes and the borrowed shirt.

The hamper, Aileen. Just put everything in the hamper, and Jonsie will wash them.

Doing as he recommended, she wondered, Who is Jonsie, and why would this person wash my clothes? She finished putting her toiletries in an empty drawer that she found under one of the sinks. She was getting tired and moving on auto-pilot.

Closing the suitcase, she pulled it off the sink and set it on the floor by the door. She brushed her teeth, then cleaned up after herself when she finished. Picking up the towels she had used, she put them into the hamper and looked around. Satisfied that she was leaving the bathroom in approximately the same shape as it had been when she'd entered it, she collected her suitcase and exited the bathroom.

Aileen had her back to the bedroom so she could close the panel behind her. "Where can I put my clothes, Mykil?" she asked without looking at him. She glanced around the room for somewhere to set her case. When he didn't answer her, she finally looked up at him.

Mykil sat in a chair in front of the fireplace. He stared at Aileen with a shell-shocked look that she didn't understand. "What?" She looked behind her to see what he could be looking at.

Groaning, he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and put his head on his hands.

Aileen looked at him, worried. From what she had observed about Mykil, he was a strong man. She set her suitcase on the floor and hurried across the room to him. Kneeling on the floor near his feet, she put a hand on his shoulder, but jerked it back when he flinched. “What’s the matter; are you hurting?”

“Yes.”

“Where? Where are you hurt? What can I do to help?” Anxiously she looked around, wondering where the phone was so she could call the paramedics.

Mykil started laughing, though it sounded dejected. “Aileen, please, just go to bed.”

“But, Mykil ...”

“Aileen, I’m hurting because I want you. I promised not to touch you, and I plan on keeping my promise. So, unless you’ve changed your mind, please go to bed.”

“Oh. I see. Well. Goodnight.” She stood, went over to the bed, and climbed into it. She didn’t take her eyes off of Mykil, who hadn’t moved out of his defeated pose. Aileen still didn’t know if she could trust him, but hoped out-of-sight meant out of mind.

“There is a glass on the table by the bed. I want you to drink its contents, please.”

Aileen looked at the glass. It had a dark red liquid in it. Picking it up, she sniffed it. “What is this, Mykil?”

“Please, it’s almost dawn, and you need your sleep. The drink won’t harm you, and I’d like you to drink it all.” He looked up at her, gave a small smile, and made a go-ahead motion with his hand.

Trying not to think about what might be in it, she put the rim of the glass to her lips. She felt too tired and too confused to put up any more resistance tonight. Perhaps tomorrow I’ll fight him more strenuously.

“All of it, Aileen.” She knew Mykil watched her as she drained the glass and set it back on the table.

“Not bad. Tasted like juice. What is it?”

When he didn't answer, she looked over at him. He just stared at her. She actually heard it, DING! "Oh. Never thought it would taste like that, though. It tasted different cold."

Snuggling down into the bed, she easily dropped off to sleep.

Shaking his head, Mykil headed for the stairs. His mate, safely asleep, didn't know he had a hard-on that would cut diamonds. He hadn't been able to keep himself from joining her mind during her shower.

He would have exploded immediately if he had tried to keep from touching her. Even mentally. He couldn't help it. He wanted her so badly. Damn it. And he still had to inform his household that he had found his mate. Adjusting himself and tugging on his in seam, he hoped nobody noticed the tented front of his pants.

Luckily, his major wood had begun to recede by the time he reached the hallway outside the kitchen. The sun had no access to the hallway, but Jonsie liked to keep the kitchen brightly lit. He sent her a small nudge telepathically, then waited for her signal to enter. At his age, indirect sunlight wouldn't kill him, but it did make for some uncomfortable moments.

"Come on in, hon. The curtains are closed." He heard her call through the door.

Entering Jonsie's domain was like walking into a caterer's dream kitchen. She had installed an industrial-sized stove and a huge refrigerator. A walk-in freezer and pantry had been built into one wall. In the center of the room, a giant island that had drawers and shelves and even a sink dominated the space. Enough cabinet space lined the walls to make even the most ardent of culinary packrats happy.

Controlling it all was a short, thin woman in her late fifties. Jonsie, a.k.a. Mabel Jones, had taken control of his houses, and consequently his life, for over twenty-five years.

Mabel Jones and Loris Bardell -- his self-appointed bodyguard -- would never be the "help"; they had become his family. They accompanied him to whatever house he lived in, but still oversaw all aspects of his many other homes.

Sitting at the table, eating breakfast, he found Jonsie and Bardell. They were going over the day's To-Do list. When Mykil walked in, the two at the table looked up and smiled.

“Morning, Mykil, what are you doing up?” Bardell looked him over carefully, presumably to make sure he was unharmed.

Jonsie stared at Mykil. “Something is different, hon. What?”

With a happy grin, Mykil informed his family of his news. “I have a mate.”

Jonsie and Bardell stood so suddenly, both their chairs hit the floor.

“A mate --”

“Did you say a mate --”

“Who --”

“Where is she --”

“When can we meet her --”

Mykil started to laugh and held up his hands to stop the rush of questions.

“Yes, a mate. Her name is Aileen Slipsworthy. Right now, she is sleeping in the underground chamber. And you will meet her tonight.” Going over to the table, he sat in one of the chairs that wasn’t lying on its back on the floor.

Bardell and Jonsie picked up their chairs and sat, still staring at him.

“A mate. Oh, I am so happy for you, Mykil. You have waited so long for someone to love and to love you back.” Jonsie practically overflowed with excitement for Mykil.

“Congratulations, Mykil. How did you find her?” While outwardly more sober, in his own excitement Bardell’s eyes twinkled brighter than the stars.

Not wanting to tell his family that he had royally fucked up and accidentally taken too much blood from what had essentially been prey, Mykil pursed his lips and tried to change the subject. “So, how’s business?”

Bardell and Jonsie glared at him, well used to his really bad stalling tactics. Between the two of them, they thought it was hilarious that in eight and a half centuries a man couldn’t learn to lie and misdirect convincingly. It was one of the many reasons they loved Mykil.

Disgruntled, he said, “I met her night before last. I thought she was prey, but when I took too much, I found out she had the gene.”

Jonsie glared at him. “Took too much? How in the world did that happen? It’s not like you’re a fledgling to lose control. What really happened?”

Embarrassed, Mykil looked at the table and told them, “I got caught up in her taste.”

Bardell looked at Jonsie. Jonsie looked at Bardell. They both burst out laughing.

“Right. Laugh it up, funny people. I nearly killed her. How funny would that have been?” Mykil went on defensively, “What if I hadn’t noticed the gene and just transfused her with the stored blood and sent her on her way? What then? I could have lost my chance at a mate.”

Trying to still his laughing enough to talk, Bardell said, “Sorry, Mykil, but you’ve always come across as so in control. Losing it like that, well, I guess you could say it’s made you more human.”

“Human? Who would want to be human?” Mykil hollered in pretend outrage. He began to see the humor of the whole situation.

Finally getting control of her laughter, Jonsie wiped her eyes on a tissue and stated matter-of-factly, “Well, I can’t wait to meet her tonight. What is she like, and what does she think about being turned?”

“That is a bit of a problem. She didn’t know about the transformation until tonight, and I’m not so sure she’s entirely comfortable with it yet. I have to teach her to be a vampire, and while I’m at it, make it seem like it isn’t that much different from the life she had been living.”

He informed them that while she seemed to be more comfortable with him, she still wasn’t sure she wanted to actually be a vampire. Then he asked them to help her see that living would be a viable option, and to aid in keeping her safe.

They agreed to help wholeheartedly, and he soon took his leave to return to Aileen and get some sleep.

* * * * *

Mykil awoke and scanned the area. Aileen had wrapped herself around him like a leech. Her head lay on his chest, her arm was wrapped around his waist, and she'd inserted one of her legs between his. What a great way to wake up. But how was he going to get out of the bed without waking her?

Carefully, he took her wrist and slid it to her side of the bed. Ever so slowly, he reached down, grasped her waist and tried to gently roll her over away from him. Whoa, whoa, whoa! Gotta move her leg first. He seriously regretted being noble. Need pounded through his body, and having her leg rubbing against his now rock-hard cock just might be the death of him.

Mykil considered the logistics for a couple of minutes, then rolled onto his side, facing her. Gods, she's beautiful. Slowly, so as not to jar her, he scooted back toward the edge of the bed. Freedom! He rolled over to climb out of the bed and realized he was closer to the edge than he'd thought. "UFFF!" Looking at the ceiling from his position on the floor, he hoped the night would get better. Thankfully, Aileen would sleep for a while and hadn't seen the graceful way he'd started the evening.

Standing and shaking his head, he made his way to the shower. Tonight he had plans to begin teaching Aileen the fundamentals of vampirism. Mykil quickly completed his shower, wondering what the best method of teaching these lessons to his mate might be.

His mate having shown herself to be prickly as a porcupine one minute and cuddly as a kitten the next, Mykil was naturally leery of her mood swings. If she's this moody now, what will she be like when she's pregnant? If the rumors are true, I am in deep trouble. Imagining Aileen pregnant with his child brought a smile to his face. He had always wanted a child. Shaking off the thought, since he could do nothing about her mood swings and had many things to do before he could get her with child, he left the bathroom and dressed.

Mykil loved the casual fashions of the present century. Jeans, T-shirts, and running shoes were his favorite attire. He could remember in past centuries having to don tight pants, tight jackets, and tight neck-cloths. At least now he could wear clothes that stretched, and as a personal choice, he didn't wear ties. Ever.

Business was mostly conducted in his office in the upper part of the house. He made money easily. "Money begets money," the old saying went, and Mykil's accounts verified that statement. He had money in many offshore accounts and invested in companies all over the world. If ever a hunter stalked him to any of

his homes, he could just gather Jonsie and Bardell -- and now, his new mate -- and move to one of his other holdings. Holdings that couldn't be traced to Mykil or his companions. One good thing about having lived for centuries was an ability to hide and later retrieve anything, be it property, money, or an identity. Computers made this doubly simple.

Delegating was also a plus when it came to running his businesses. By putting good people in key positions, he had worked himself into an advisory role, which he enjoyed. Mykil only received calls when there was an emergency.

For now, though, business took second place to his personal life. And since his personal life was going to wake up in less than half an hour, he had to get busy.

Mykil left the underground chamber and sealed it behind him. Nothing would harm what he had waited so long to find. If only the gods had made it easier to find the gene. For some reason the gene appeared randomly in female humans. There was no rhyme or reason why one woman in a family had the gene and her sister did not. The consensus was that the drunken gods had a hand in the explanation. Consequently, it would be unexplainable. Mykil wasn't terribly worried about the answer anymore; he had found his mate. When he could quit worrying about Aileen, he would continue to look for others with the gene. Hope had recently spread, with the discovery of a unique serum. The new Archimedes had developed it while she was still human, as a test for anemia. Turns out, it could also be used as a test for the Sumerian gene. There were unmated vampires all over the world who needed that hope. Two of them were close to him, and Mykil would like to see them happily mated.

Mykil laughed and let himself out of the house. He could hear Jonsie and Bardell talking excitedly about meeting Aileen. First, he needed to feed.

He changed his outer form to that of a large raven and took to the air. Knowing he had little time before Aileen woke, he headed directly for town. As he approached the outskirts of Oceanview, he cast out mental feelers to find the closest lone human adult.

Mykil found a likely candidate in the alley next to the convenience store. Strangely enough, he wasn't drunk or high. Just homeless.

Mykil fed quickly, and leaving money in the man's pants pocket, he shifted back to the raven's body, then headed toward home and Aileen. As he got closer, he felt a disturbance coming from his house. Damn. I don't need this

right now. Grumbling to himself, Mykil touched ground, returned to his regular self, and entered his house.

Striding into the hall and looking at the clock that hung on the wall near the entrance, he cursed and continued on to the parlor. Once there, he took one look at the men sprawled comfortably in his chairs, drinking his bottled blood, and said, "Good evening. Glad you've stopped by. Now go away." Abruptly, he turned around and strode back out of the room, heading straight for the underground chamber.

The two men stared at the empty doorway, then turned to each other with almost identical looks of surprise. In unison, they looked to Bardell for an explanation.

Bardell, who stood near one of the walls, cleared his throat uncomfortably and informed the curious gentlemen, "Mykil is rather busy at the moment. I tried to tell you when you arrived, but you didn't really give me a chance."

Alexi Torkilov raised one dark brown brow at this pronouncement. "I do not recall you informing us that our friend had lost all of his manners. Never before has he invited us to leave just as we have arrived. Most strange, is it not, Johann?" Raking his ice-crystal-blue eyes over an increasingly nervous Bardell, he took a sip out of his glass.

"You're scaring our inconsiderate host's man, Alexi. He isn't sure if you are going to rip his throat out, or not. Bardell here isn't responsible for Mykil's boorishness." Johann smiled at Bardell, which caused Bardell to pale slightly.

Of the two men staring at Bardell, waiting for answers, he didn't know which made him more nervous. Alexi, a Russian, had the scariest eyes ever placed in a head; they glowed like blue diamonds and were made more striking because of his dark brown, shoulder-length hair. On the other hand, Johann Detriksson was, and forever would be, a Viking. He had golden-blond hair that fell to the center of his back, and his eyes seemed as black as coal.

Both men were approximately the same height as Mykil, but the builds on the men vastly differed. Johann was built like a brick wall, muscles upon muscles. Alexi was built lean and muscular, but his strength was in martial arts and not in brute force.

"Well, Bardell, my friend, are you going to explain Mykil's rudeness?" Alexi queried softly.

“Mykil really should tell you his news himself.” Bardell started to sweat. The men wouldn’t touch or even read telepathically any companion of Mykil’s, but it was still alarming to have vampires staring at you as if you were the mouse and they were the snakes.

“Do tell, Bardell. You have us on pins and needles. And unless you wish to attempt to prevent us from following Mykil out of sheer curiosity, you should give us a good reason why we should dismiss his less than gracious actions.” Johann was smiling at him again. That could be bad.

At the prospect of Mykil being followed, Bardell caved. “According to Mykil, two nights ago ... umm, Mykil took a mate.” Exhaling heavily, Bardell slumped against the wall that he’d been standing near.

Both vampires surged to their feet. Talking at once, they bombarded Bardell with questions. With each question, they spun him to face the speaker. Bardell felt as if he were being forced to watch a tennis match.

“What did you say --”

“Did you say a mate --”

“Mykil truly found a mate --”

“Excellent news --”

“What is she like --”

“When can we meet her --”

Into the din came a loud clapping sound that caught the attention of the three men in the parlor. Jonsie stood in the doorway, hands on hips and a fierce frown on her face. “Now, is this any way for grown men to act? Calm down, and Bardell and I will tell you what we know.”

Bardell glanced over at Jonsie. “Sheesh. Now I know how Mykil felt when we blasted him with questions.”

As the men took her advice and settled back into their chairs, Jonsie and Bardell filled the two vampires in on the latest household news.

* * * * *

What a time to have a houseful of vampires. I can't catch a break here. I just want to spend some time with Aileen and teach her some survival tips, but what do I get? Pain-in-the-neck friends invading my privacy. I think I'm starting to lose my oh-so-famous cool. He wasn't truly upset with his friends. But Mykil did know that it would be easier to teach Aileen the survival skills she needed to know if they were alone. No distractions. Naturally, though, everyone in the universe had shown up on his doorstep the second he needed complete privacy.

Hurrying down the stairs, he barricaded the door. Interruptions aren't an option until she's fed. And knowing Aileen, it'll be no cakewalk getting her to feed the way I have in mind. She needed to use those pearly whites he had so kindly gifted her with. Sighing, he entered the room.

Aileen sat up in the bed, rubbing her eyes, still half asleep. Catching sight of Mykil, she yawned widely and stretched. "Hi." She then rolled off the bed and went into the bathroom.

Staring at the closed panel and blinking, Mykil tried to slow his heart rate. Consummating this union would be much more enjoyable than trying to feed her. Unfortunately, she probably wouldn't have the same urges for quite some time.

Waiting for Aileen to return from the bathroom, Mykil made the bed and looked around the room for something else to occupy his time. Gathering his thoughts, he considered many ways to broach the subject of feeding. Nothing feasible occurred to him. Deciding that he would have to improvise, he sat down on the edge of the bed and waited patiently for Aileen to come out of the bathroom.

He could hear her thoughts and knew that she knew he had something planned and that she probably wanted no part of it.

Leaning against the door jam, he eavesdropped when she spoke aloud, probably to her reflection, "Well, I guess I had better get this over with."

However grumpy she sounded about it, inside she was feeling anticipation. He knew she thought it was kind of fun fighting with him.

Mykil smiled at this thought, but quickly schooled his features.

Putting her nightclothes into the hamper, Aileen left the bathroom and came face to face with him.

He could smell the toothpaste and soap from her wash as she left the bathroom. Her hair had been combed out and wrapped up in a sloppy bun. She didn't look at him as he lay on the bed. Instead, she walked over to her suitcase and retrieved jeans, a loose, button-down top with long sleeves, and underclothes, then went back into the bathroom. As she dressed, he heard her wonder what this day -- no, that wasn't right -- this night would bring.

"I know you have something unpleasant planned for tonight. Let's have it. What are you going to do to me now?"

Good. She had decided to be belligerent. He could work with that.

Mykil stared into her eyes and smiled. "Good evening, Aileen. I trust you slept well?" Just thinking about how she slept caused his body to react.

"I slept just fine, not that it's any of your business." Looking around, she asked him curiously, "Just where did you sleep?"

"In the bed with you." Seeing her stricken look, he had to add, "Actually, I slept in the bed under you. You seem to be a bit of a bed hog."

Chapter Five

Aileen's eyes widened in shock at his pronouncement.

"You slept with me? I thought I said you couldn't do that." Sputtering out a denial, she looked over to the bed, then back at Mykil. And I missed it? No! I'm not going to think like that!

Ignoring her verbal outburst, Mykil took her by the hand and led her to one of the chairs. Still sputtering, Aileen let him sit her in it. Knowing he was going to say something she wouldn't like, she scowled at him and crossed her arms and legs defensively.

"Aileen, you know that you're a vampire now, correct?" Aileen paused and then nodded.

"Well, vampires have to feed. You know this, as well." He glanced at her. When she nodded again, he continued. "We feed off humans." When she started to shake her head, he held up one hand to stop her. "We don't hurt or kill anyone; we just take a little blood and give them a nice dream. They don't even have to know we're there."

"Mykil, I don't think I can do that. I realize what you gave me in the glass last night was blood, and it didn't taste bad. In fact, it tasted really sweet. But you are asking me to take it directly from a person. Isn't that kind of like going up to a cow and slicing off a hunk?" Making a face at the thought, she continued, "Couldn't I just continue being fed from a glass?"

"No, Aileen, you must learn to feed as we're meant to. Blood banks are convenient in an emergency, but the blood has little nutritional value. If you fed exclusively off that kind of blood, you would slowly starve to death. I know you didn't ask for this, but it's done, and I would like you to try these new things. I only bring up feeding now because I think it will be the only aspect of your new life that you will balk at."

"And if I cannot accept this life?"

From the dark look on his face, she wasn't sure she wanted to find out. But she held firm. Aileen had to know what the consequences would be for defying him. As he said, the only thing she could see so far that she might not like was feeding, as he called it. Biting someone on the neck and sucking out their blood like a mosquito wasn't terribly appetizing to her.

Running a hand down his face, Mykil seemed to consider his options. “Would you at least try it once before you say that you hate it? You never know until you try.”

“I’ve heard parents say that to get their kids to eat vegetables. How often do you think it works for them?” Exasperated, Aileen stood and started to pace. “What’s next, bribery?”

“Would it work?”

Looking at him curiously, she asked, “What have you got?”

“I could teach you to fly.”

“I can fly? Really fly?” Dubiously, she looked over her shoulder at Mykil. She wanted to see by the expression on his face if he lied. Ever since she had been a child, she’d wanted to be able to fly.

“You can fly, Aileen. You just have to decide whether you want to fly in the form you’re in now, or in an alternate form. But first, you have to feed, and if we can’t get past that ...” He shook his head, denying the consequences.

Interested, Aileen looked at him. “So what you’re saying is that if I go bite some poor, defenseless person, you’ll teach me to fly.”

“Correct. You must feed first.”

It seemed he wouldn’t let her get out of feeding. Just by the look on his face, she could tell. Mykil would probably hypnotize her or something to force her to do what he wanted. Well, hell. Considering her options, she decided once wouldn’t kill her. And there were always other options open to her. But not wanting to think about those options at the moment, she gave Mykil her answer. “Let’s go before I change my mind.”

As Mykil removed the shield he had thrown up when he entered, he could feel their presence. Not an ounce of privacy. Gently placing Aileen behind him, he reluctantly opened the door. Everyone he felt close to in this world had gathered in the room, trying to act nonchalant. The two humans bustled about the room, straightening things that didn’t need straightening, and the two vampires pretended to examine the spines of books. Everyone had his or her eyes on the entrance to the underground suite.

Keeping Aileen behind him, Mykil entered the library. Aileen tried to slide around him, but he moved to block her path, and she couldn't seem to get past him. Again and again, she tried to get around him. Mykil matched her movements exactly.

Huffing, Aileen gave up and smacked him on the arm. "Get out of my way. Can't you see I'm trying to get by?"

Hearing a female gasp and male snickering, Aileen froze. Mykil stopped with her, so that he still stood directly in front of her. He felt her lean a little to the left. Aileen put her hand on his arm and peeked around him to see who was in the library. Catching sight of the three men and one woman who blatantly stared at her, she ducked back behind Mykil. Groaning and leaning her forehead on Mykil's back, she asked, "Friends of yours?"

Taking the hand that still rested on his arm, he squeezed it softly to share his strength with her. "I guess there is no avoiding it, love. Come, I'll introduce them to you." Then carefully keeping himself between her and the others in the room, he guided her to the nearest chair and placed her in it. Mykil didn't sit, but stood alertly near her knee.

Mykil felt completely confused, the feelings of protectiveness ran rampant throughout him. This was his family, and he knew there was no danger to his mate from anyone here, but he still couldn't quell the overwhelming desire to keep any and every threat away from Aileen. He would die to protect her. Mykil worried one of them would make a wrong move and he wouldn't stop to consider who they were. He would just attack.

Constructing a protective barrier around Aileen and himself afforded him a measure of relief. Nothing living could penetrate the barrier. He knew Aileen saw the barrier and wanted to question him about it, so he put his hand on her arm to keep her from asking. I will explain the barrier later, please.

Aileen sighed. Fine, but you had better darned well not forget.

All the occupants of the room, except Aileen, recognized the barrier for what it was and respectfully moved as far away as the room would allow.

Leaning casually against the bookcase he had been perusing, Alexi crossed his arms across his chest and watched as Mykil set up the protective measures. "We do not wish to harm your mate, Mykil. We only wish to meet such an important addition to your family. Will you introduce us, please?"

Jonsie perched on a loveseat that had been positioned across the room. Bardell carefully sat next to her. Mykil could sense that they didn't understand why he would place the barrier between himself and the others in the room. But they understood the danger to themselves, so avoided getting near it.

Mykil glanced at his friends. He knew what they felt and thought -- they were broadcasting loudly enough. Johann was at first defensive. Never have I posed a threat to anything of Mykil's.

When he would have said this out loud, Alexi sent him a warning mentally. Think before you react. She is the most important thing in his existence, Johann. Mykil hasn't consummated this mating and is reacting instinctively to what he perceives as a threat. We are male and too close to his woman. Relax, my friend, and let Mykil protect his mate. Johann nodded his understanding and took up a relaxed stance similar to Alexi's. Mykil relaxed incrementally in response to their understanding.

Aileen pursed her lips in exasperation and pinched his arm to get his attention. When he didn't react, she made a tsking sound and looked at the people who cautiously occupied the room.

"So, you're Mykil's friends. Nice to meet you. My name is Aileen, and I've been turned into a vampire by this maniac." Smiling prettily, she waited for their reactions.

No one took a breath. There was total silence. I can hear the clock in the hall chiming the hour. Mykil snorted, cleared his throat, then broke out into laughter. The room's occupants, barring Aileen, all stared at Mykil because of his reaction to her forthright pronouncement, confused.

Mykil relaxed slightly, stepped back, and placed one hand on the back of Aileen's chair. The barrier thinned, but he still didn't feel comfortable enough to completely dissipate it.

"Aileen, these curious people, who are completely invading my privacy, are my family. This lovely lady is Mabel Jones, affectionately known as Jonsie."

Jonsie smiled and nodded her head to Aileen.

"Jonsie is my keeper. She makes sure my households run smoothly. Without her we would be wallowing in filth, and I would be living in a cave somewhere." Blowing a kiss to Jonsie, he moved on.

“Loris Bardell, who answers to the name Bardell. He controls my schedule and protects my homes and person when I’m at rest. Without him I would be dust by now.”

Aileen smiled at the two on the couch. “So, you’re both still human?” When they nodded their heads, Aileen looked up at Mykil and scowled. We will talk about this later, mister. They get to stay human, but I just had to be changed ... You have some explaining to do about this little conundrum. Looking back at Jonsie and Bardell, she said to them, “It’s very nice to meet you. I hope to get to know you better before I go back home.”

She missed the startled looks of the humans on the couch, but Mykil saw and shook his head slowly. She looked to the men leaning on the bookcases. “You two aren’t human. I don’t understand what I’m feeling, but for some reason I know that you’re like Mykil. I hadn’t noticed it before, but he gives off a signal, like a low-frequency vibration. For days now, I suppose I could feel the hum from Mykil, but I didn’t give it a thought until I came close to you two. You guys are throwing off vibes that could actually register on a Richter scale. Anyone care to explain?”

“Vampires need to know when other vampires are around, for safety reasons. I will be teaching you to monitor your surroundings so you’ll know if there’s any other being in your vicinity. Every being gives off a different frequency hum. You need to know the differences in the hums. As there are ‘bad’ humans, there are also ‘bad’ vampires. I’ve met some in my time. There are also the hunters that you must be wary of. But we will go over that later. I suppose there’s no other choice but for me to introduce the rest of my family. Actually, they are just great friends, but as they have a tendency to drop in on me right when I don’t want them to, just like brothers would, I consider them family.” Mykil glared at them.

Johann glared back and introduced himself. “Johann Detriksson is what I’m called.”

Mykil caught Alexi’s eye and nodded. Alexi made a small motion with his head. “I am Alexi Torkilov.”

Aileen acknowledged the introductions, then looked up at Mykil and whispered to him, “I truly hate to change the subject, but I’m starting to get cold feet. I don’t know if I’m going to be able to go through with it.”

Placing a hand on her shoulder, Mykil looked at the other occupants in the room. "I need to begin Aileen's lessons. Now. It's imperative that she receive her first lesson before she changes her mind." Mykil stood and pulled Aileen to her feet. "I'm sure she will be available for further discussion, later." Cautiously keeping an eye on everyone in the room, he led Aileen through the front door.

The ones left in the room looked at each other. Slapping her hands on her thighs, Jonsie snapped querulously, "Well, that was interesting. He didn't even give us a chance to get to know her."

Alexi held up a staying hand. "Jonsie, don't you realize what lesson he must teach her?"

"No. No, I don't. But what could be so important ...?"

Johann broke in. "Aileen needs to learn to feed, Jonsie, soon. I could feel her hunger and her fear of feeding from here. Mykil knows he has to teach her this lesson first. Otherwise she will starve."

Sagging against the cushions of the couch, Jonsie muttered, "Oh, I didn't think about that." Reaching for Bardell's hand, she gripped it hard. "Poor thing. It can't be easy for her. I mean, having to face using people for food." Shuddering, she missed Johann rolling his eyes and Alexi's small smile.

Both men left a moment later. Going outside and transforming into red foxes, they reinforced their shields so Aileen wouldn't be able to detect them, and took to the woods in pursuit.

Mykil knew his friends were following them, and sent a mental warning. Do anything to interfere, and I will lose all your money on the stock market. His friends laughed at his threat and promised not to let her even know they were there.

Stopping on the outskirts of town, Mykil led Aileen into an old, recently abandoned barn. He hoped that the seclusion of the barn would make the lesson easier for her.

The inside of the barn was dark. Even with their extraordinary eyesight, it was hard to see. Mykil held out his hand and concentrated. A spark of light sputtered to life over his palm. It grew and grew until it was the size of a

softball. He lifted his hand toward the ceiling, and the ball floated upwards. The light penetrated the darkness of the barn, allowing them to see.

“Neat trick,” Aileen commented. “Are you going to teach it to me?”

“The glowing orb is a difficult trick, as you called it, to master. It took me many decades to perfect it. But to answer your question, yes, I will teach you the process.” Mykil walked to the barn doors and closed one door completely. The other he left open a little. “Aileen, you must open your mind now. You have to be able to reach out with your mind and call a human to you.”

“What do you mean, call?” She used the same inflection he had used, with a little hint of nervousness. “Is it anything like hypnotizing someone?”

“A little like that. Just remember, nothing we do will harm anyone. Your analogy about going up to a cow and cutting a hunk from it is absolutely wrong. When we feed, it is more like plucking an apple off of a tree. It doesn’t harm the tree and in some cases it can help.” Mykil had difficulty trying to explain the different nuances of human feeding and vampire feeding. Having been born a vampire, he had only eaten human food until he turned eighteen years old and his adult metabolism took over. Then he began to feed. Having grown up with feeding being normal, he hadn’t considered it difficult to switch from food to blood.

Aileen gave him a sour look and dryly asked him, “Wasn’t it an apple that got Eve in trouble? Okay, so I have to call for my ... what do I call my blood donor?”

“I always call them my prey.” He told her honestly. “Just as you were my prey before you became my mate.”

“Great, now I have to get all Queen of the Jungle-ish.” She sighed gustily, then looked up at him. “Fine. How do I call my prey?”

Mykil strode over to where Aileen stood. “Open your mind and seek mine. I know you can do that. I’ve felt you running around in there when you think I’m not looking.” Laughing at her chagrined expression, he leaned over and brushed his lips across hers for a fleeting kiss.

“Cut that out.” She pushed him away. “And I don’t mean to go into your mind; I just find myself in there sometimes and can’t help but look around. There’s some interesting stuff in there. It’s better than a history book.”

Giving her a mock frown, he asked, “Are you calling me old?”

“Certainly not!” Aileen looked at him speculatively. “Just how old are you, anyway?”

“I’m eight hundred fifty-three years old, and you’re changing the subject. We’re supposed to be feeding you, and if you would concentrate, this lesson would already be over with. Now concentrate and open your mind.”

Aileen closed her eyes, and with a muttered, “You don’t look a day over eight hundred and fifty,” let her mind expand.

Hmm. He heard her in his mind. Interesting. A first, I could only see my eyelids. Now I can see you. You have your eyes closed, oo. Are you coming along with me on my journey? This is very strange.

Isn’t it? You’re doing fine, Aileen; now, stop expanding and send your mind forward just a little. Imagine your thoughts are a bird, and send the bird out of your body. Mykil wrapped a tendril of thought around Aileen’s consciousness, for his own peace of mind. He didn’t want her probe to end up in Japan, while her body stayed in the barn. It would be too confusing the first time out.

Aileen had pictured a lovely red, blue, and green parrot, then imagined herself floating into it, becoming the parrot. Very interesting. What next?

Very colorful, Aileen. All you have to do now is fly out of the barn and toward town. I’ll be with you, so you don’t have to worry. Mykil projected the image of an owl so Aileen could have something visual to focus on.

Mykil’s thought-owl joined Aileen’s thought-parrot and led it to the door of the barn. Once outside, he sent his thought-owl to the sky, circling, while Aileen got the knack of thought-flight.

Hey, this isn’t the flying you were talking about, is it? Aileen questioned. ‘Cause if it is, I’m getting gypped.

Aileen, I told you that you would get the flying lesson after you’ve fed. You don’t even have enough strength to fly right now. After, I promise. Now get up here. If it was taking this long just getting to town, how long was it going to take to get her to actually feed? Mykil carefully kept the thought away from Aileen.

Catching a noise that sounded like laughter from behind the barn, the thought-parrot looked that way. Only seeing a couple of large foxes, she ignored them and looked back at his thought-owl. Okay, I can do this. I just flap my wings and take off. Simple.

He felt her trying to imagine that she was the parrot flapping her wings. He laughed when she yelped. She had finally noticed that she was circling the barn already, with his thought-owl right beside her.

That was easy.

Thought-flight is much simpler than actual flight. Actual flight you really have to flap your wings. In thought-flight all you have to do is think you are flying. Simple. isn't it? Enjoying her enthusiasm, Mykil let her play for a few moments just to let her get the hang of it.

Mykil debated sending an aside to the two nosy foxes behind the barn, but knowing they wouldn't listen to him anyway, decided to just ignore them.

Aileen ... Aileen ... Aileen, pay attention. We need to continue the lesson now. When Mykil finally had Aileen's attention again, he continued. Now you have to imagine you are flying in the direction you want to go, preferably toward town. You must keep your sense open for prey. Don't cop an attitude with me; what do you think we are out here for? Exasperated and not happy that his friends were witnessing his failure to control his mate, he attempted to steer her thought-parrot toward town.

Having been figuratively brought back to earth, Aileen let herself be led in the direction Mykil wanted her to go. I feel a little light-headed. Strange, considering I am not even in my head. I'm having to concentrate on keeping in the air alongside you, and it seems to be getting harder and harder.

It's because you're hungry. The light-headedness will stop after you feed.

They soon reached town, and Mykil explained how to locate a lone individual. Aileen had to expand her mind's eye until she could see several blocks at a time. She could even tell where people hid themselves at night, if she tried, such as the homeless that were sleeping in boxes in the alleys, or the thugs hiding behind cars waiting for their victims to approach.

Only moments after entering town, Aileen told him someone sat behind the bakery, smoking a cigarette. The person was alone, and not a soul was

anywhere near, or even within earshot. Mykil led Aileen to the smoker, and they landed on the ground several feet in front of him.

Mykil instructed Aileen to call the man to the barn, where her body patiently waited. Aileen found out accidentally that there were varying strengths of commands. As this was her first foray into mind control, she sent the man an extremely forceful order.

Seconds later, a stunned Aileen and a disgusted Mykil took to the air and watched the fat baker running at top speed toward the barn. Aileen and Mykil raced the poor baker to their destination. Mykil wanted their minds to be back in their bodies before the man reached them.

As they approached the barn, Mykil could see the two foxes rolling around on the ground in an unseemly lack of personal control. If he hadn't known his friends to be as staid as he had been, he would have thought they were laughing at him. However, Mykil hadn't seen Alexi laugh in a century or more. And Johann, while having a sense of humor, didn't normally find the escapades of his friends worth much more than a smile, much less worth losing it like those two foxes seemed to be doing. Still, just to be on the safe side, he sent torture and dismemberment thoughts at his two friends.

Telling Aileen's thought-parrot to just hop her little self right over to her body so he would be able to quickly explain how to remerge, Mykil rejoined his own body.

"Aileen, if you put the parrot in the chest area of your body, you can remerge yourself." Watching as she did what he said, he could see the parrot melt into Aileen's body. He watched her carefully as she merged herself back together. It could be an interesting experience even for a seasoned vampire, and he didn't want her to have any problems. She stumbled slightly, but he didn't mention it as she caught herself quickly and took a couple of deep breaths. "Now, if your prey hasn't had a heart attack on the way over here, we will need to calm his heart rate before you can feed. Adrenaline to vampires is like candy to children. It makes us ping off the walls. I'll not have you turning hyper on me." I have enough problems handling you already, he finished to himself behind thick mental walls.

Just in time, too. Huffing and puffing, the baker burst into the barn. Skidding to a stop in the center of the large building, the man bent over at the waist, put his hands on his knees, and panted heavily in an attempt to catch his breath.

“Whew, I haven’t run like that since I got out of the Army. Guess I need to start going to the gym again.”

Ignoring the man, Mykil continued the lesson. “Aileen, love, you must put him in a bit of a trance. Stare into his eyes ...”

“I know this part,” Aileen interrupted. In a Bela Lugosi-style accent, she slurred out, “I say, ‘Looook into my eyesss, you are getting drrrowsy.’ Right?” Throwing him a sour look, she walked over to the man from the bakery. “What is your name?”

“Bob, ma’am. Bob Henderson.” He straightened and thrust out his hand for her to shake.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Bob.” Aileen shook his hand briefly.

Mykil smiled, then schooled his features. The man’s hand was sweaty, and Aileen was easily reading his lascivious thoughts through the contact.

“Ugh, for some strange reason, he thinks I called him for some kinky sex. I’ve rarely even considered having regular sex with anyone, much less kinky sex.”

“Good.” Mykil was going to comment on something else, but one of Aileen’s random thoughts slipped into his mind.

Hmm, Mykil tied to the bed and me with a piece of rabbit fur.

Mykil about popped. He had to control himself mightily to keep from going to her. She needed to feed!

“Dear heart, we brought him here for a reason, and it isn’t polite conversation. Could we get on with this?” Mykil wanted to force-feed her by sending a strong compulsion to her, but knew that when she found out, she would tear into him. Again. If he didn’t want to go through this whole process again tomorrow night, he had better let her do this on her own.

“Okay, okay. I’m supposed to climb into his mind and give him happy thoughts. I can do that.” Aileen proceeded to send her mind into Bob’s the same way she had Mykil’s. Ewww, gross! What a perv. “Mykil, do you know what kind of sicko this guy is?”

He sighed heavily. “Just get on with it. You aren’t here to psychoanalyze the man. Quit playing with your food.” He tossed out that last jab to bring her thoughts back to him and off “the perv.” She seemed to be entirely too interested in Bob’s peccadilloes. Aileen should be interested in only one person’s peccadilloes. His. Running a hand through his hair, he tried to bring her back to the task.

Aileen, having thoroughly examined Bob’s mind, interrupted his thoughts. “What next? I really don’t want to be in this cesspool of debauchery very long.”

Mykil sensed that if he didn’t get this done quickly, he would lose her cooperation. “Implant a good memory. It doesn’t have to be elaborate or even sexual; just have him remember doing something that he likes to do.”

“Hmm, let’s see, something he likes to do that isn’t sexual. Mykil, the only thing he likes to do that isn’t sexual is to go joyriding in his boss’s sports car.” Aileen sounded disgusted.

Mykil shook his head and said, “Well, work with it. Implant the memory of taking the car for a spin, and then all you have to do is locate his jugular and ...”

Waving her hand at him to make him hush, she said, “I know, I know. You don’t have to tell me that part. I’ve been dreading it for two days now.”

She managed implanting the ride easily. I can do this. Just walk right up to him and bite him. She glanced at the spot she was supposed to bite, and strange feelings passed through her. Hunger pounded through her system. While she stared at Bob’s jugular, she could hear the blood rushing through his veins. Aileen saw the throb of blood as it pulsed past, and her vision narrowed until all she could see was that throbbing, pulsing, rushing spot on Bob’s neck.

Still staring at the man’s pulse, Aileen never noticed taking the final step toward him. She didn’t notice her fangs exploding into her mouth. She did, however, notice when she sank her teeth into Bob’s jugular. Her teeth slid into his neck like a well-honed knife through warm butter. When she sucked lightly on the wound, warm blood cascaded into her mouth. Groaning, she drank more. This was no longer about the man. She didn’t notice him at all, just the flavor of his blood. Oh, better than chocolate and Christmas rolled into one. I can’t believe how good the warm blood tastes. I tastes so much better this way than what I had last night.

Vaguely, she heard Mykil resume his instructions. "Aileen, you must stop now. Remove your teeth from the wound and lick it carefully. It will close the wound and leave no trace of you ever having touched him."

Doing as he said, Aileen licked the wound and stepped back from Bob. Running a hand softly down the side of his face, Aileen thanked him silently. "Now what?" Her voice had turned low and husky, but she couldn't seem to care. Her mind was to be on other things, like how her body throbbed with need. A need no longer caused by hunger, but by the extreme want of sex.

Mykil was barely able to grind out her final task. He still occupied a corner of her mind, and her excitement escalated his own. "You must tell him to return to where you found him. He will remember nothing of what happened here, or of you and me. Only a pleasurable joyride."

Smiling at Bob, Aileen gave him his orders. "You may go back to work now, Bob. Thank you."

They watched the baker -- who still acted under the influence -- leave and close the barn door behind him. Slowly Aileen turned to Mykil. For just a moment, she stared into his eyes, then let her eyes crawl down the length of his body. He saw her smile when she noticed his rigid stance, his fisted hands, and the bulge that stretched the front of his jeans to the bursting point. Oh, damn!

Breathing heavily, Aileen growled low in her chest. Her nostrils flared as she caught Mykil's scent. A fine film of sweat covered his whole body, and she apparently could smell each drop. It seemed like the scent acted as an aphrodisiac on Aileen. I have to taste you. He heard her repeating it over and over in her mind as she slowly moved toward him. He isn't going to get away from me. I want him and I will have him. It might have scared him if he hadn't wanted it so badly himself.

He had never had sex with a vampire. The only vampire females alive were mated and, consequently, off-limits. He had been with humans during his lifetime, but that option had ended two days ago. Once mated, vampires practiced monogamy. He didn't know what to expect. Newly turned vampires were rumored to be sexually primitive, but they and their mates were so secretive that there was no proof of the truthfulness of this rumor. That thought sent waves of hope and fear throughout his whole body. Hope that the rumors were true, and fear of the unknown. He didn't want to accidentally get too rough with her, but he felt violent, wanting to bite and scratch.

Mykil's eyes narrowed as he watched Aileen stalk him. He didn't move a muscle. He could smell the musky odor of sex as her need for him increased. Aileen's eyes glowed red, and as he watched, her fingernails grew long and sharp. A shiver traveled down his spine; he had never before had a woman look at him as if she would like to devour him. He liked that look.

Her voice was husky when she finally spoke. "My blood feels like it's boiling, and I want what I want right now."

"What is it you want?"

"Don't you already know?"

"Um, no. I lost our link when Bob left."

"Mykil ..." She growled out his name warningly. "You will do as I say."

Mykil opened his mouth, sure he should say something about being a male and in charge, but couldn't think of anything, so he shut his mouth and just stared at her.

"You will do what I say because I own you. Every succulent inch of your body belongs to me." Close enough now to touch him from behind, she placed her hand on his back. "You will freely give me what I want, or I will take it. Do you understand?"

Turning his head toward her, he looked into the glowing red depths of her eyes and exhaled heavily.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked softly.

Looking around the barn, she spotted a pile of clean hay. "There. I want you on the hay."

Chapter Six

Following instructions, he headed for the pile of hay. Then he remembered his nosy friends. Scanning the area, he breathed a sigh of relief. They had left the property. Good. I wouldn't want to have to kill them for seeing Aileen like this. Man, she's sexy.

Taking the few steps that it took to reach the center of the hay pile, he turned to Aileen. She had followed him and now stood directly in front of him.

"Now what?" Having her dictate to him was extremely erotic. He'd never taken a submissive role during lovemaking and hadn't known it could be sexy. It was. Damned sexy. He was hot, hard, and having a difficult time keeping his hands off her. But since she was running this show, he strove to contain his excitement.

Reaching up, Aileen grabbed Mykil's T-shirt by the collar with both hands. With a tremendous yank, she split the shirt down the center and pushed it off his shoulders so that it fell down his arms and onto the hay.

Panting hard and staring at what she had uncovered, Aileen felt an overwhelming joy that this belonged to her. Mykil had golden skin, and the sweat filming his body made it glow. He had well-defined pecs with a patch of dark hair in the center of his chest, wide shoulders, and washboard abdominals.

Never before in her life had she wanted any man the way she wanted Mykil. Aileen had an idea that feeding had intensified her urges, but since she had wanted Mykil for some time now, she wasn't going to fight it. Virginity wouldn't be an excuse to deny herself the one thing she had to have.

Not taking her eyes off of him, she raised her hands and began to slowly unbutton her shirt. She noticed that beads of sweat had broken out over Mykil's upper lip by the time she released the third button. By the time she undid the fifth and final button, she noticed he had begun to tremble. She parted the shirt and slid it off her shoulders. It slid slowly down her arms and over her hands, falling to the hay. Mykil's eyes tracked the falling shirt, but when she reached behind her to unclasp her bra, his attention snapped back to what she was doing. Sending the bra the way of the shirt, she waited for Mykil to look back up at her face. And waited.

She kept getting partial thoughts from Mykil. Oh, gods ... they're perfect ... so creamy ... areolas the color of caramel, I must taste ...

Growling, she leapt on him, knocking him back into the hay. Mykil wrapped his arms around her as she crashed into him, and he took her down, as well. Aileen didn't give him time to catch his breath. She climbed up his body until she had her knees planted on either side of his hips and sat high up on his thighs. Sliding his strong, hot hands up her jean-clad thighs, he settled his hands low on her hips.

Aileen looked down on what she considered her possession, and smiled. She was going to do this and do this her way. It felt good to be in control for a change. The last few days had been rough.

Placing her hands flat on his abdomen, she slowly slid them up his torso. Over the tightened muscles of his stomach, beyond the peaks and valleys made by his ribs, and finally stopped her fact-finding excursion with her hands cupping his flexing pecs.

Aileen loved the feel of his skin. Satin on steel. His body was so strong, she could feel the rippling of the muscles beneath his soft skin. It made goose bumps pop out all over her body. She watched as her thumb slid across his male nipple. Immediately it tightened into a small nubbin. Astonished, Aileen's brows rose, and she looked up into his face. His head was thrown back and his eyes were scrunched closed. There was such agony on his face, she was afraid she had somehow hurt him.

She started to lift her hands, but he stopped her. "Shit! Don't stop now! Please, Aileen, don't stop," he begged through gritted teeth.

Granting his request was within her powers, and her attention drifted back to his chest. She'd read romances all her life and wondered if the things she had read in those books concerning the sensitivity of a man's nipples might be true. With a glint in her glowing eyes, she decided to find out firsthand. Not taking her eyes off of the object of her attention, she gradually lowered the upper part of her body to his.

Her tongue lightly touched his nipple. He arched his upper body toward her mouth, groaning uncontrollably. She took his reaction as a good sign and ran her tongue over his nipple again. "Mmmm," she moaned. Not having thought of a person as having a flavor, she'd never considered liking the taste of someone. Mykil had a distinct flavor. He tasted of summer -- sunshine, warm breezes, freshly mown grass, and quiet picnics in the park. These were the images that flashed through her mind as she slowly ran her extended tongue back and forth over his taut nipple.

While keeping her hands busy by running a thumb across one nipple and the other hand across his ribs, she sucked his nipple into her open mouth. Mykil's hips thrust up so hard that Aileen was lifted off the ground. Rolling her tongue and teeth around his nipple, Aileen ignored Mykil's desperate pleading.

Shifting her attention to his other nipple, she gave it the same thorough treatment. Mykil was shaking his head back and forth when she slid her torso up his body. The feel of the hair on his chest abrading her own nipples caused her to pause. Testing this new sensation, she lightly brushed the tips of her breasts across Mykil's chest. The repeated action caused a tingling thread to run from her hardened nipples to the aching spot between her legs. Closing her eyes and throwing her head back in ecstasy, she continued the movement, savoring the new, intense feelings.

Mykil raised his hands from her hips, slid them between their bodies to her breasts, and grasped her nipples between his thumb and forefinger. She lifted her upper body off him just enough for him to get a firmer grip. Lightly tugging and twisting her nipples, Mykil stared into her face.

"What?"

"I just want to remember you like this for all eternity. You're beautiful and you're mine."

Aileen laughed. "You're mine, too. And don't you forget that."

"How could I?"

He removed one hand from her breast, reached up, and pulled out the fasteners in her hair. The thick, dark tendrils cascaded down over them, igniting nerve endings she hadn't known she had. He returned his hand to her sensitive breast, holding her in place while he lifted his head to seize her nipple with his mouth. He returned each caress she had given him with a reciprocating caress, and she was soon grinding herself onto his sex.

His erection strained the seams of his jeans. "I hurt. I need to undo my pants, or I won't be any good to you."

"Oh, no, you don't. I have plans."

He chuckled softly, then slid one hand to the top button of his jeans and started to undo it.

Aileen missed the touch of his oh-so-clever hand when he moved it from her breast. She wasn't sure she wanted him to stop what he had been doing. Planning on retrieving the stray hand and returning it to its assigned task, she reached down between her legs and found something so intriguing, she temporarily forgot what she had been after. Lowering her eyes and straightening her body so she could see the area of discovery, she brushed Mykil's hand out of the way. Using both hands, Aileen released all the buttons of his jeans and slid her hand into the open vee.

Mykil jumped when she tenderly ran her hand over his straining erection. She grunted and removed her hand, then grabbed the waistband of his pants and started tugging them down.

Exasperated at not being able to remove the impediment, she glared down at Mykil. "Get these off. Now!"

Hurrying to do her bidding, he lifted his hips and pushed the tight jeans to his knees. He stopped there. "Aileen, dearest. I can't push them any further."

Glancing at the bunched-up jeans, Aileen scooted down his legs to his feet. Removing his shoes and tossing them aside, she reached for the legs of his pants. At her mighty pull, they flew off him, and she jettisoned them across the barn. Raising her eyes up his legs, she saw the tented underwear. WOW! She considered this sight for a moment, then reached up and grasped the waistband of his briefs, pulled them down his legs, and sent them the way of his jeans.

Slithering up his legs, she eyed his erection. Aileen hadn't seen a naked man's parts before. She had seen them in books, but this ... Mykil's penis was huge! A touch of fear flickered in her thoughts. Suppressing it didn't take much effort, though. The empty place between her legs was more than willing to accommodate his protruding shaft.

Completing the visual examination that nearly sent Mykil into the throes of insanity, Aileen finished the climb up his body to fit her mouth to his. Mykil wrapped his arms firmly around her and deepened the kiss. He must have been waiting for her to venture high enough to taste her, and he took full advantage.

Sliding his tongue against hers, he licked the inside of her mouth. How he managed to let her know that she was the only thing in his universe that mattered, with simply a slow, soft kiss, she didn't know, but he succeeded. He ran his hands over her bare back and up her sides slowly, as if memorizing the

feel of her skin. He groaned long and low in his chest, and Aileen shivered at the vibration against her breasts.

Taking his bottom lip into her mouth, she sank her teeth into it lightly. Licking the small wound in apology, she felt him reach his own tongue out to duel with hers.

While Aileen was deep in concentration, trying to take control of the kiss, Mykil slid his hands between their bodies and undid her jeans. Sliding them and her panties over her hips and partially down her thighs, he cupped her naked bottom in his palms and squeezed lightly. Aileen lifted her head and looked at him. His eyes had taken on the red glow that she had seen before. His face had gone dark and tight. The passion he felt was obvious and looked painful.

Pushing up with her hands, she knelt between his knees. He came up with her because he didn't want to remove his hands from her, and watched as she stood and finished removing her pants and panties, which turned out to be a bit of a chore; Mykil wouldn't give her the room to maneuver. Finally, Aileen was able to toe off her track shoes and step out of her pants. Kicking them out of the way, she knelt back between Mykil's thighs and resumed her position of lying flat on him. Her hair spread over them both, and they reveled in the satin feel of it. Placing a last long, wet kiss on his mouth, she sat up on his lower thighs.

Gradually running her hands down his chest and stomach, she reached for his jumping staff. Wrapping both hands around it and sliding them slowly up and down the length of him, she looked into his eyes. "I want this inside me, but I need you to help me."

He reached his hand down to touch the core of her and inserted one finger inside. She felt a small sting that caused her to flinch visibly. He looked up at her questioningly. "Aileen, I need to know, and since you have been blocking me, I have to ask: is this your first time?"

Lost in the feeling of his intimate touch, she could barely answer. "Yes. But if you stop, I will rip out your heart." Staring down into his eyes, she tightened her hands slightly on the velvet-over-steel staff, causing it to jump.

"I couldn't stop now even if you did rip out my heart. But, dear heart, I will be needing the part that you're fondling so delicately." He looked up at her with a small smile on his face. "Place your knees on the outside of my hips again. A

better angle is required.” He slid her forward until she could feel the head of his staff at her weeping pussy.

Holding her by the hips, he told her to let go with her hands and slipped just the tip of himself into her. When she gasped, he stopped and looked into her face. She looked down at where he was entering, and placing her hands on his stomach so she could watch, she relaxed a little, sliding onto him a bit farther. Panting hard at the feeling of him inside her, she felt when he butted up against her hymen. Looking into his face, she lifted a little on her knees and smiled. Gazing back down to where they were connected, she pushed herself back down on him hard, breaking through and filling herself completely.

Blinking once, Aileen looked up at Mykil’s face and noticed that he was in agony. She felt full. Very full. But as the seconds ticked by, she started to feel the tingling in her lower abdomen again. Wiggling her bottom to adjust to the feel of him inside her, she accidentally rubbed her clitoris against his pubic hair. Lightning flashed through her body at the abrasion. Mykil lifted his hips at the motion she made and slid a bit farther into her. Both moaned at the wonderful feeling this created.

Slowly sliding up until he was barely within her, she stopped and, still looking into his eyes, drove herself down on him hard. They inhaled in unison, and with the guiding touch that Mykil had on her hips, they fell into a rhythm that was slow, hard, and deep.

Aileen threw her head back at the sensations ricocheting throughout her body.

“I’m getting close, Aileen. And I don’t want to go alone.”

She jumped when he touched her softly at the bundle of nerves that had caused her such intense feeling earlier, and her concentration shattered. She went nuts in his arms, rising and falling onto him with ever-quickening speed. Feeling the sensitive walls of her sex begin to quiver, she leaned down onto his chest to kiss him deeply.

She could feel a tightening in her body, and her head started to spin. An icy-hot feeling traveled up her spine, and she flew. Her insides shook, and she could feel Mykil grow even larger inside her, causing her to fly even higher. They both exploded simultaneously, catching each other’s outbursts in their mouths.

Mykil took his hand from her center, and continuing the slow in-and-out movement as they gradually fell back to the earth, he pushed her hair away

from her face. Aileen laid her head on his chest and sighed. She collapsed completely on him. Smiling softly, she kissed the nipple that was handy and felt him twitch.

He started to pull himself from her, but she grunted and pushed down onto his softening member. Apparently not wanting to end the connection either, he let her stay where she was while they waited for the world to reform.

Gradually, Aileen regained full consciousness. She hadn't really lost consciousness, but she had lost all knowledge of the world around her. Her skin was still sensitive to the gentle strokes that Mykil's hands administered. Carefully pushing herself up on her hands, she looked at Mykil. His hair was mussed and full of hay, his eyes closed, with such a contented look on his face that she could have mistaken him for a little boy. Tenderness for him welled up inside her.

Aileen felt him begin to swell and looked down at their coupled bodies. Slyly glancing up at him through her lashes, she saw he was staring at her and asked, "Are we gonna do it again?"

Laughing, he grabbed her around the waist and rolled them over without breaking contact. Very slowly, he began the intimate movements that were as old as time itself. Mykil teasingly asked her, "Do you really think we should? I mean, I will strive to obey if you insist." Reaching down and grasping her bottom, he tilted her pelvis just enough to get a nice slow, deep penetration.

"Ohhh, Mykil. Oh, yesss, that feels sooo good," she whispered over and over, her eyes staring into his. Aileen wrapped her arms under his and dug her nails into his back. Pulling him down to her mouth, she kissed him slowly. This time wasn't for rushing; it was for savoring. And savor she did. Sipping at his mouth, she arched into him. "Yes. Mmmm, deeper, harder," were the only words she could say. Climbing the mountain again, she let herself go, let Mykil take her there.

Mykil took her higher and higher, all the while kissing her and murmuring into her ear, "Gods, baby, you are so hot, I could stay here the rest of my existence." He pushed into her harder and deeper until waves of her climax broke over her.

Still rocking his hips into her, Mykil laid his head on her shoulder. While she rode her wave, he licked her neck over and over. She felt as his teeth extended and pierced her skin. Her body jerked, then relaxed, and she tilted her head to the side so he could get a better angle. Tasting and pumping into her, he

exploded deeply inside of her. It went on and on. After an eternity, she recalled her surroundings. He lightly licked the wound on her neck, and by the time he lifted his head, she was practically asleep.

Pushing the hair out of her face, he whispered to her. "Aileen, love, I hate to end this now, but it will be dawn soon, and I have to get you home."

Slowly her eyes opened, and she looked up, smiling tenderly at Mykil. "Okay, but you have to find my clothes. I'm not sure what I did with them."

Mykil snorted and started to roll off of her. She stilled him with a tightening of her arms, and when he looked down at her, she stretched up and placed a soft kiss on his mouth. She couldn't help herself. She wanted to climb inside him and be a part of him forever.

"If you start that again, we will never leave here, dear heart." Then he rolled off her and sat up. Gazing around the barn, he shook his head, making her smile. "This is not where I wanted us to consummate our mating, Aileen. I am also slightly perturbed that you didn't mention your virginity." He gave her a dirty look as he stood. "I had plans of doing this the right way. Candles, silk sheets, hell, even possibly a bed. But, no, Mrs. Give-It-To-Me-Now-Or-Else ..." He broke off to cross the room to pick up his underwear and jeans, then put both on and looked around the room to locate the rest of their garments strewn around the barn. He wandered around, gathering clothing and shoes, then looked at Aileen.

She looked back at him worriedly. "Did I ..."

He interrupted her and squelched her fears. "Instead of my romantic vision, I get a private fantasy fulfilled. Darn it." He gave her a mock-stern look.

Aileen sat up and laughed, relieved. "Sorry, I'm not exactly sure what happened to me, but I think it had to do with the feeding." Gathering her clothes from Mykil, she dressed. "It was incredible, Mykil. I stood there looking at what's-his-name; then I noticed his pulse. Next thing I know, I'm hotter than heck, looking at you as if you're my property and taking what I want. I'm so sorry ..." she began, but he immediately cut her off with a raised hand.

"Don't you dare apologize. This was the single most erotic night I've ever spent. I think it's rather appropriate that it happened with my mate. So, no apologies." Making sure her buttons were straight on her shirt, he slid one hand

under her hair and onto her neck, pulling her into his kiss. “Never apologize for wanting me. Just let me know, and I will do my best to oblige.” His eyes glinted mischievously, and he kissed her quickly. “Let’s go home. If I’m going to die, I would prefer it be caused by making love to you and not by the sun.”

She laughed, then laughed harder at the yelp that slipped out of him when the palm of her hand connected with his bottom.

* * * * *

Totally mussed, Aileen’s hair flying free and Mykil bare-chested, the laughing lovers burst into the house and slammed the door behind them. Hand in hand they headed for the library. Screeching to a halt just inside the door, they looked at the occupants of the room. If Mykil hadn’t known better, he would have imagined no one had moved since he and Aileen had left.

Alexi and Johann were obvious in their casualness by flipping through books at random. Mykil wondered, if they kept at it, would they actually find a book that interested them? Bardell and Jonsie were ensconced on the sofa again and talking quietly.

“You know,” he began casually, “we don’t believe that you haven’t left this room all night.” Glancing at Aileen and winking, he asked the vampires, “When did you two snoops leave the barn?”

Aileen gasped, punched Mykil in the arm, and hissed. “You mean to say that they were there the whole time, and you didn’t tell me? Are you crazy?” Lowering her voice to a whisper, which she didn’t realize the vampires could still hear, she asked Mykil, “What if they saw ...?”

Placing his fingers on her mouth, he quieted her. “They were gone by the time you got really bossy. I checked, love. They only saw you learning how to feed.” Noticing her blush, he ran the back of his fingers across her cheek and asked the cause.

“Mykil, they saw me bite the fat man. I’m not sure, but I think I moaned. It’s embarrassing.”

Mykil glared at his friends for being the cause of her embarrassment. He placed an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into him so she could hide her red face in his neck.

Alexi sent his thoughts to the two other male vampires, to make sure their story was straight. I am very happy for you, Mykil. Here is what we tell her. We left when she pointed you to the hay, but we will say we left when the fat man left the barn. Is that good enough for you? At Johann and Mykil's nods, he added, But you do know you ae gonna catch it when she isn't around. "I want you on the hay," indeed!

Suppressing a snicker that would have blown the whole charade, Alexi spoke to Aileen out loud. "Aileen, Johann and I were at the barn. One of these days, and I hope soon, we will have to instruct mates of our own on how to feed. Hoping for some pointers, Johann and I followed you to the barn. Might I add, you did extremely well? We followed your prey back to the bakery to make sure he had no mishaps, knowing you would want to know."

Mykil knew the humans in the room didn't know what was being discussed, since half the conversation was silent. They had attended many such conversations, so they understood what was going on. Mykil tried to avoid excluding them, but on occasion, it happened. It was one of the pitfalls of living with a vampire.

Aileen thought it over for a moment. "Well, it's too late to do anything now." She turned in Mykil's arms. "I suppose I will have to let this one slide. However," she continued when she noticed the collective vampire sigh, "next time if you need pointers, ask permission first, or wait until Mykil returns and ask him. Please."

Both men nodded in agreement. Mykil heard Johann's voice in his head and was pretty sure that Alexi could, too. Better watch out, Mykil; she's a feisty one. Although their faces stayed serious, Mykil could hear their collective mental laughter. Glaring at them a final time, he looked to the quiet humans on the sofa.

Dear heart, do you mind if Jonsie ecorts you down and assts you in getting ready for bed? She is dying to get to know you. You can wait until tomorrow to get to know Bardell better. Does this meet with your approval? Mykil looked down into her eyes, and she nodded and pulled away.

"Even though it's still early, I seem to be exhausted. I'm off to bed. Jonsie, would you like to accompany me?" At Jonsie's affirmative motion, she continued, "Good day, gentlemen."

Turning back quickly, she strode over to Bardell and took his hand. "I'm sorry to be leaving without getting to know you tonight. Perhaps tomorrow we will sit down and have a long chat. Is that all right with you?"

Bardell smiled at her and nodded. "I understand that you've had a trying time, and you need your rest. Please, we'll get to know each other tomorrow."

Aileen smiled softly, and then she and Jonsie walked to the appropriate bookcase. Jonsie showed Aileen the catch that allowed entrance to the underground chamber. Pulling it open, the ladies entered the stairwell, and the bookcase closed behind them.

"Well. I'm sure you gentlemen have things to discuss. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me." Bardell stood and left the library.

Mykil watched his man leave the room, then turned to his friends. "Next time you follow us unannounced, I'll do my best to try to separate your heads from your bodies. Do you understand?" Directing the evil eye to his two laughing friends, he crossed the hall to the billiard room and went to the bar. Behind the bar was another hidden panel, where he kept a supply of blood.

Offering a drink to his friends, he filled three glasses at their acceptance, then returned the bottle to the hidden compartment and closed the door.

Johann lifted his glass and proposed a toast. "To Mykil's new mate. May the rest of us find one soon." They all concurred and they drank.

Chapter Seven

Downstairs, the two women got down to the business of learning more about one another. An instant rapport sprang up between them, and soon after telling their life stories, they giggled together like old friends.

“So, what do you think of our Mykil?” Jonsie leaned toward her, the corner of her mouth raised slyly.

Aileen replied innocently. “What do you mean?”

Laughing, Jonsie waved her hands. “Come on, give. From the state of your hair and clothes, not to mention Mykil’s missing shirt, something happened.”

“You’re right, Jonsie.” Sighing heavily, Aileen confessed, “I practically raped the man.”

Aileen stared at her, slightly startled when Jonsie broke out laughing. “I bet he just loved that. I don’t want details, but what caused you to go from ‘I hope to get to know you better before I go home’ to hay-head and dusty clothes?”

“I have hay in my hair, and Mykil didn’t tell me? The men in the library saw it, too! I’ll kill Mykil for this.” Taking several deep breaths, she shook her head. “Dang, it will take a century to get it all out.” Raising a hand to her hair, she felt around and began pulling out stray bits of hay. “Let me grab my comb, and I’ll see if I can explain to you what I don’t fully understand myself.”

“Go ahead. Grab a quick shower while you’re in there, and when you come out, I’ll help you comb your hair.” Jonsie stood and shooed Aileen toward the bathroom.

“Sounds like a plan.”

* * * * *

After his friends had left for the evening, Mykil had a brainstorm. One that would probably get him killed. But being the man he prided himself on, he decided to run with it.

“Bardell!”

Bardell burst into the room with his gun drawn. Quickly, he scanned the area for a threat. Not finding one, he squinted his eyes at his boss and then asked the question that seemed to be at the forefront of his mind. "What?"

"Why did you bring your gun? Oh, never mind. I have a job for you. Sometime today, after you get some sleep, but before we wake up, could you run over to Aileen's and get some of her things?" Mykil began to pace as he thought about what would make her more comfortable living in his home. All real men knew that if a woman's prized possessions were in your house, she planned to stay. He personally had never had a woman live with him besides staff and Jonsie, and she didn't count. But all the books, magazines, and television shows told him that once a woman started bringing her stuff in, it was next to impossible to get rid of her. Couldn't it work the other way, as well? If he started to bring her stuff in, she would have to stay. Right? Right. Also, if a woman gave a man her virginity, she considered him a "keeper." Aileen didn't so much give it as force it on me. And I would love to have her force me again. Sighing reminiscently, he got back on track.

Bardell put his gun back in the holster and pulled out a pen and a pad of paper. "Guess you're kind of excited about being newly mated. You scared me nearly to death, though. Could we try not to make my heart stop next time you need a favor? I can get the stuff, Mykil, but what kind of things do you want me to get?"

"Look around and find things that seem to make her comfortable. She has some figurines in her bedroom; bring those. I brought all her books, so you don't need to worry about that. I don't know about what she has in the rest of her house. I didn't get to see all of it, but use your own judgment. Better yet, take Jonsie. She's a woman and should know what women like." Mykil looked at Bardell and nodded. This would work like a charm.

* * * * *

The shower didn't take long, and Aileen was soon sitting on the floor in front of a crackling fire in the fireplace. Jonsie sat behind her on a stool, running a comb through Aileen's hair.

"I don't understand what's going on with me, Jonsie. One minute I am terribly frightened of what I've become, and the next, I am reveling in the changes. Did you know I bit the fat baker guy?" Looking over her shoulder at Jonsie, she whispered conspiratorially, "I'm about to impart some important woman-to-woman networking information, so pay close attention. Do you know what

kind of sicko that baker is? It grosses me out to think about the things he wants to do to his female customers. If there's a report of a rape or kidnapping with the intent to make a woman a sex slave, send the police to his house."

She made such a face that Jonsie laughed. "Anyway, there I was, minding my own business, catching a movie like I do every Friday night, and what happens? I get turned into a vampire and informed I have a mate. Admittedly, he is hotter than heck and makes my libido jump. But, really, I don't even know this guy, and I've already jumped his bones. I didn't even let Troy get into a heavy petting session with me the whole time we went out." She knew she sounded whiney, but heck ...

Jonsie made "I understand" murmurs while she continued to comb Aileen's hair.

"It just seems that every time I get within a few feet of Mykil, I want to kiss him. After I fed, well, I'm not exactly sure what happened there. I think I snapped. I got all these feelings of ownership when it came to Mykil. Thinking that he was my possession and therefore he had to submit to me. Sounds strange, doesn't it?" Aileen lowered her head in abject misery.

"Well, for starters, you've already claimed that Mykil turns you on. So, if the feeding amplified your feelings, doesn't it compute that you would go nuclear on him?" When Aileen looked at her with a glimmer of hope, Jonsie continued, "Second, you haven't said that feeding was horrid, so I'm assuming it wasn't so bad. I've heard that feeding is the hardest part for a new vampire to get through. After that, it's a breeze. So, no problem there. Third, you're upset that you had sex with Mykil and not with this Troy character. Compare how you felt when you were around Troy and when you are with Mykil. Do they touch you when you don't want them to? How about trust? Granted, it's easier to trust Mykil because he can't have any real secrets with you running around in his mind, so what's the point of lying? How do they treat you when you are alone with them or in public? Is it the same, or different, in those two settings?"

After combing out all the hay and the snarls that were in Aileen's hair, Jonsie began to braid it neatly. "And for my last point, I am finding a new bakery. I know exactly who you're talking about, and he has always given me the willies."

They laughed together, and then Aileen asked, "How did you and Mykil meet, Jonsie?"

“Oh, dear. Now, there’s a story. In the sixties, I was a young woman working as a delivery person while financing my way through college. While making a delivery to a house in a run-down neighborhood, I saw three burly men hauling a rolled-up carpet out of a house. Since I lived on a tight budget, and they were throwing such a nice carpet away, I decided that if it had no noticeable holes in it, I might as well take it home. At the time, most of my living room furniture had been scavenged, and it got me through college.”

“Yeah, I did nearly the same thing.”

“I think most college students do. Anyway, I discreetly followed the van they had tossed the rug into and watched as they threw it out into a deserted lot. The van never even stopped! After making sure the rug’s previous owners had left, I went and retrieved it. What I found inside was so astonishing, I almost fainted! The battered body of a man had been discarded with my new rug. He still lived, barely, and I felt I had a moral obligation to help. I took him straight to my home and laid him on my couch. He wouldn’t let me call the police, and we argued about it for some time. Eventually, I gave in and went back to work.”

“Weren’t you worried about leaving someone in your home unattended?”

“I didn’t have anything worthwhile to steal. Anyway, later that evening, I returned home and the man had already healed enough to sit up on his own. I soon learned that he was a vampire, but I didn’t really care who or what he was as long as he didn’t decide I was lunch without asking. I cared for him until he became well enough to care for himself.” Jonsie smiled softly.

“I guess Mykil was grateful to me for saving his life. The next night, he went out, and when he came back, he said he’d rewarded the hunters who had captured him by ending their miserable lives. Just as smooth as you please, as if killing was a simple thing. Then he rewarded me by paying my entire college tuition, even though I protested. He asked me to take the job of being in charge of his households after I graduated, having excelled in my business classes.

“Running Mykil’s many estates is like running a multinational corporation with lots of employees. Over time, I married, but my husband died in an industrial accident six and a half years ago, and Mykil granted my request to accompany him to whichever house he occupied at the moment. I’m still in charge of all his homes, but now, I’m also in charge of Mykil. Although I may just leave that job to you now.”

“I’ll gladly take him off your hands. I’m sorry your husband died, but I’m glad you’re here now.” Aileen laid a commiserating hand over Jonsie’s. “I’ll probably have to purchase a bullwhip to make him listen to me.”

They both started giggling and didn’t notice when Mykil came downstairs, until he spoke.

“What do we have here? It’s nice to see my two girls getting along.” He held out a hand, and Aileen grasped it lightly.

“Hello, Mykil, we were just talking about finding a new bakery. The old one seems rather unsavory.” Aileen let him pull her up.

“I’m going to go up to bed. I’ll see you two this evening.” With a little wave at the new couple, Jonsie bid them goodnight.

Mykil waved a hand to ensure their protection after Jonsie left. Aileen looked to the stairway and made a startled sound. “I can actually see the barrier tonight, Mykil. It looks like a shimmering green pool of water edged in gold, blocking the entrance to the stairway.” Glancing up into his eyes, she smiled at him.

Still holding her hand, he pulled her to the bed. “I’m going to put you to bed, and then I’m going to take a shower. I seem to have hay where hay doesn’t belong.”

Laughing as she sat on the bed, she sucked in air through her teeth when he placed his lips in her palm and kissed it softly. Closing her fingers around the kiss, he let her go and headed for the bathroom.

Aileen gave up trying to understand him and decided to make herself comfortable while she waited for him to come back into the room. Pulling down the bedcovers, she climbed into the toasty-warm bed. Ahh, this is heaven. As she lay there, she thought about the night she’d had. She’d liked the thought-flying and decided that feeding wasn’t so bad. Could probably even get used to it. Making love with Mykil ... now, that was wonderful.

Mykil’s family was nice, too. She knew they were really just trusted friends, but she understood. After her own parents died, she’d had no one close to her. To this day she didn’t have anyone that she could talk to about private things like she’d done with Jonsie. Sure, she had her agent, but Deborah would take any personal comment as a threat to her deadline. Still, being fairly new in

town and having become a borderline hermit since she'd arrived, she hadn't made any friends.

Just as she started to drift off to sleep, she latched on to a random thought and made a conscious attempt to send to him. Mykil?

Yes, love?

You forgot my flying lessons.

She fell asleep with his sincerest apologies drifting through her mind.

Mykil came out of the bathroom ready to reiterate his apologies for not taking her flying. What with everything else that had happened this evening, it had completely slipped his mind.

Noticing that she had fallen asleep, he held his tongue. He would have to face an explanation tomorrow, so he considered it for a bit while he got ready for bed. Since she hadn't mentioned it all night either, he concluded that it wasn't necessarily all his fault. Mykil made plans to feed her early so he could begin the flying lessons. He also remembered that Bardell wanted some time to get to know Aileen, as well. Also, sometime during the night they needed to make a stop at the police station to sign the complaints against Troy. Not enough hours in the night.

Climbing into bed beside Aileen, he waved a hand to close the bed curtains, then reached over to pull her toward him. Lying on his back, he pulled her against his side with her head on his shoulder. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her in tight. In her sleep, she reached for him and wrapped one arm around his waist, snuggling in to sleep.

Mykil was happy with the position, and with a last exhalation, both his and hers, he pushed them both into sleep.

* * * * *

As he woke, he inhaled deeply, scanning the vicinity out of habit. He felt no unexpected vibrations within his property and found everything as it should be.

Aileen had wrapped herself around him nicely. Her head lay on his shoulder, her breasts pressed into his side, a hand lay on his chest, and she had inserted one leg between his.

He ran his hand up her hip and side. Slowly he slid his other hand to the back of the leg that pressed between his. Pulling her knee so that it lay parallel to his hips, he turned toward her slightly and slipped his throbbing erection into her.

Putting his lips to hers, he sent the command to wake her and tasted her first breath. Moving his hips in a slow, circular motion to give her the most friction possible, he deepened the kiss.

She wrapped her arms around his waist tightly, lifting her leg higher on his hip. He grunted when she placed her hands on his bottom and pulled him into her tighter. She sighed into his mouth as he achieved deeper penetration.

He kept their loving slow and deep, but the climax he felt seemed earth-shattering.

Lazing about in the afterglow and kissing lightly, Aileen looked up at Mykil and asked him about the evening's plans.

"We both have to feed, and you need to get acquainted with Bardell. We promised to give him some quality time tonight. He's been very patient, and I know he's champing at the bit to get to know you. Afterwards the evening is ours." Giving her a piratical leer, he reached over and whacked her on her bottom. "But first, we shower. Get up, lazybones."

Screeching and vowing to pay him back, she burst out of bed and raced him to the shower, which he made sure they enjoyed thoroughly.

Quite a bit later, bodies squeaky clean and entirely satiated, they dressed and left the house in search of sustenance. Aileen looked up curiously when Mykil put his arm on hers to stop her. "How about some flying lessons? There's no time like the present to teach you a new skill."

"Sounds great to me." She turned and stood directly in front of him. "Okay. Ready."

"What we're going to do is keep your normal shape to fly for now. You'll need to learn to shape-shift before you learn to fly as a bird."

When she nodded her understanding, he continued. "To fly, you have to imagine that you're as light as a feather. Concentrate on the wind touching you and lifting you off the ground."

Closing her eyes to block out everything but his voice, she did as he said. Aileen could feel the wind blowing around her body, faster and faster, until she felt herself lift off the ground.

“Good. Now open your eyes, but don’t lose concentration.”

Opening her eyes slowly so she wouldn’t receive a shock, she gasped, stunned nonetheless. She was floating about two feet off the ground! Looking down, it seemed a lot farther, though. Like standing on the edge of a cliff, but without the cliff. Luckily, she wasn’t bothered by vertigo, or she would have been in a heck of a mess. Literally. Aileen lifted her eyes to look at Mykil. Instead of reassuring her as she expected him to, he laughed.

“You should see your face, love. You’re all big eyes and open mouth. Like a fish who suddenly found herself out of water.” Ducking her retaliatory swat, he grabbed her hand and asked if she was ready to fly.

After calling him the three-letter word for donkey, she assured him she was definitely ready to fly.

“Watch what you say to me, woman, or I might not teach you how to land,” he teased. “Now pay attention, because if you don’t do exactly as I say, you could find yourself halfway across Nevada before I catch up with you. The most important thing to remember is, you can’t fly through solid objects. Go around them or over them, but don’t try to go through them. It hurts a lot when you smack into something.”

One word rushed through Aileen’s mind: Duh! He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Okay, Mykil, I get the point. I’ll start out slow until I learn how to avoid stuff.”

“Splendid. When you learned to walk, where did you put your concentration?” Aileen knew he was trying to hint at something, but she had no clue what his question had to do with flying. Mykil was looking at her encouragingly, and she wondered why. It finally dawned on her that the best way to teach her anything was by letting her work it out for herself. Maybe that’s what he was doing. “Come on, where did you look when you took your first baby steps?” he asked when she didn’t answer right away.

“I guess I looked at the ground where I was going to put my feet, but what’s that got to do with flying?” Becoming exasperated, she gave him the wide-

eyed, pursed-lips look that women were so good at, and that men recognized immediately.

“Right, you looked at where you were going. Learning to fly uses the same principle. Concentrate on the direction you want to go.”

She looked at him thoughtfully for a second; then her eyes widened. “Oh, I get it. I have to think myself forward. You said almost anything can be done with thought, when I asked you about the barrier the first night.” Lowering her head in concentration, she thought about moving forward.

Still floating two feet off the ground, she told herself she wanted to go straight ahead. Laughing, she floated forward and looked at Mykil. “I did it! I’m flying!”

Shaking his head and laughing with her, he raised one eyebrow at her. “Actually, you’re floating. You’re bobbing along like a cork in water. Flying is a little faster and more controlled. But you are doing great. We need to head for town, so if you would please point yourself in that direction, I might get to eat tonight. I’m faint with hunger. And since you nearly drowned me in the shower, you owe me. I need sustenance.” He was teasing her. Aileen knew her face turned beet red, so she reached out to swat him. He used her movement as an excuse to grab and kiss her.

“Fine, you big baby, let’s go feed you.” She stuck her nose in the air and ignored his laughing as she turned around and floated off toward town.

Concentrating, Aileen picked up speed while she flew. By the time they hit the outskirts of town she was zipping along at thirty-five miles an hour.

“Speed Demon Aileen. That’s me! I’m having the best time ever!” He heard her mind qualify, Well, aside from the time I spent making love to Mykil, of course. “Woo-hoo! Eat my dust, Mykil!” she hollered.

Mykil stayed just behind and to the side of her, ready to assist if she got herself into trouble. He didn’t want to tell her yet that a well-fed vampire’s top speed surpassed one hundred miles per hour and that they could hold that speed for up to five hours. She was having such a good time being the “Speed Demon” that he didn’t want to burst her bubble. Besides, she looked cute. Laughing and zipping around trees and other objects she encountered on the way to town, she reminded him of his youth and learning to fly himself. A very long time ago.

“Aileen, remember last night, when you sent your mind to find prey?” he asked after finally getting her attention.

“Yes, but how can I concentrate on flying if I have to leave my body? Am I going to have to stop flying just to bite somebody? I would rather keep flying.”

“You won’t have to leave your body. And you don’t have to stop flying until we find prey. Once we do, though, you have to land so you don’t knock the human over. Feed, and then you can fly again. All right?” He needed her agreement, or she would never come down, and he knew it.

“Yes, yes. Feed, and then we’ll fly some more.” She stuck her bottom lip out like a petulant child who wasn’t getting her way. Still pouting, she looked at Mykil. “Let’s get this over with; I wanna have some fun.”

“Yes, dear.” He shook his head at her and widened his senses. “Two blocks over is a young couple walking out of a bar.” Mykil explained how to see the couple, and once she had a lock on their location, turned her in that direction.

Looking at the couple that Mykil had chosen apparently amused Aileen. Landing a little hard because of her uncontrollable laughter, she had to lean on the wall until she stopped chortling. Mykil gave her a stern look and compelled the couple to halt.

“They’re goths. They look more like a vampire than any real vampire I’ve met so far. All three of them. If I bite them, will they bite back?” And with this question, she fell back to laughing uproariously.

Mykil shook his head at her silliness. Taking Aileen’s arm, he guided her to the female. “Feed, woman; we don’t have all night.”

“Spoilsport. All right. First the Bela Lugosi thing.” Looking into the female goth’s mind, Aileen found something the girl liked to do and implanted it as happening now, with Mykil’s reinforcement. “Then I bite.” She walked up to the woman and holding her gently in her arms, carefully bit down on the woman’s neck. Tasty, but not mind-altering as Baker Boy’s. I could get used to this. No cooking, no cleaning, I just have to hug a lot of weirdos.

“Aileen, concentrate on your prey, or you will lose control of her. She will be unnecessarily frightened, and you will have a fight on your hands.” Mykil grasped the goth male and began to feed.

Finishing up with the female, Aileen closed the wound she'd made on the woman's neck and let her go. Looking over at Mykil, her eyes widened. Wow! Is that what it looks like when he bites me? I've got to get a camcorder so I can see what it really looks like. I bet it's hot.

Aileen. Stop. You're distracting me. And beside, I think that unauthorized video porn is illegal in most states. Hearing her laugh brought a smile to his face, and he had to hurry to close the wound on the man's neck before the blood ran onto his gothic costume. Mykil didn't want any unexplained messes left to bring back true memories.

"Let's get out of here. These two have to get some rest, and if we don't leave now, I'm going to have to punish you for your wicked thoughts. Rise up off the ground, and I will lift the compulsion on these two." Mykil watched Aileen rise into the air. She was a little wobbly because she was still laughing sporadically.

Taking to the air himself, he let the minds of the couple go and followed Aileen toward home.

Aileen enjoyed herself immensely on the way back to Mykil's house. She practiced soaring and swooping, dodging and weaving, and, most important, stopping.

Mykil didn't want her to tire herself. She was still new to vampirism and hadn't developed her powers enough to use them for long periods yet.

"It's time to go home now, little bird. There are other things you can learn, you know." He wanted to get her home and see if Bardell had had a chance to see to Aileen's surprise.

"You know I'm susceptible to a bribe. I'll race you there." Taking off at her top speed, laughter trailing behind her, she yelled back to him, "Last one there is a rotten egg!"

Letting her stay ahead of him so she could win the race wasn't a problem for Mykil. He entertained himself quite well by checking out Aileen's ass as it bounced around while she tried to stay stable.

Aileen landed on her feet in Mykil's front yard. She was still laughing when she turned to look at Mykil. "I won!"

Mykil smiled and opened his arms. "Well, come and get your prize."

Aileen jumped into his arms and lifted her mouth to his. After Mykil kissed her thoroughly, and when she could pry her eyes open, she looked into his eyes. “Wow, nice prize.”

She’d lifted her lips to his for another kiss, when they heard a strange noise. Bardell cleared his throat again. He stood in the front doorway trying to catch their attention. When he had it, he looked apologetically at them.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we seem to have a situation. Mykil, can I speak to you privately for a second?”

Mykil stood Aileen on her own feet and looked down at her. “Do you mind?”

“Go ahead. I’ll practice floating.”

Mykil joined Bardell at the doorway. “What’s the problem?”

Bardell glanced at Aileen, then turned his back to her. Hoping she couldn’t hear him, he informed Mykil, “Aileen’s house was vandalized. I found it when I went over there this afternoon, like you asked. Someone had been there and had trashed her living room and office. I don’t know if anything was taken, but just about every item in those two rooms was destroyed. I don’t know why the person didn’t trash the bedroom or the kitchen, but he might have been interrupted.”

Mykil listened to Bardell’s report, becoming more enraged by the second. “Thank you, Bardell. Have you notified the police?” When Bardell indicated that he had not, Mykil asked him to go to Aileen’s house and wait for them. “We’ll call the police from there.”

Bardell headed for the garage to get the car. Mykil turned to Aileen. She floated four feet off the ground and looked like she was concentrating on holding that position.

“Dear heart, could you come down for a minute? I have something to tell you.”

She quickly lowered herself to the ground and looked at him. He knew by the look on her face that his eyes had turned a glowing red.

“What? Mykil, what is the matter?” She ran up to him and put her hands on his chest. “What has gotten you so angry?”

Mykil put his hands on hers. "Aileen, someone broke into your house." At her cry of dismay, he wrapped his arms around her. "I don't know what the extent of the damage is, but Bardell said that there's a mess in your office and living room. We have to go there and call the police."

At Aileen's nod, they lifted off the ground and flew to Aileen's house. Bardell had already arrived, and when they landed, he walked over to them. "I'm sorry, Aileen. I didn't know if you would want me to contact the authorities, all things considered. But I called them on my cell phone as soon as I drove up."

Placing her hand on Bardell's arm, she let him know without words that she approved of his actions.

"Did the police say whether we could go inside or not?" Aileen questioned Bardell.

"They asked that we not go in. The less everything is disturbed, the better." He gently told her a little of what she should expect when she went inside.

Mykil put his arm around Aileen and pulled her close. Rubbing her back soothingly, he told her that everything would be all right.

Mykil listened to Aileen's thoughts. They bounced between fear and anger. "Dear heart, tell me, where did you keep all the mementos of your family?"

"Most are in my room. There's a chest at the foot of my bed that has my photographs and little things from my parents." Her eyes started to well up with tears at the thought of losing the few items that she had left of them.

Catching a tear with the pad of his thumb, he spoke to her softly. "It'll be all right. Bardell said the damage is limited to your office and the living room. He doesn't think anyone went into the bedroom. Your chest is probably untouched. As soon as the police get here and allow us in, we'll go directly to the chest and make sure. Okay?"

"Okay." Aileen's smile wobbled a little, but it was a pretty good attempt.

Mykil lifted his head from where he had been resting it on Aileen's. In the distance, he heard a vehicle heading in their direction. "The police are here."

Chapter Eight

Aileen watched the police cruiser roll to a stop in the yard.

Officers Thompson and Albermyrel had responded to the call. After killing the engine on their patrol car, they got out and walked toward the trio that waited outside.

Both officers looked around curiously. Thompson asked for an explanation.

Bardell stepped forward. "This evening I came to Miss Slipsworthy's house to pick up a few personal items for her. When I arrived, the door stood open, but I didn't see anyone around. I went inside, but didn't touch anything, then went home to inform Mr. Votad and Miss Slipsworthy what I had found. The house is exactly as I found it. We contacted you and returned here." Bardell had told the officers what had transpired in a no-nonsense manner that would be hard to dispute.

Officer Albermyrel went into the house while Officer Thompson took all three of their statements. He soon returned outside and went to the squad car.

Opening the trunk, he pulled out a case and opened it. Inside the foam-lined case, all sorts of high-tech camera equipment waited to be utilized.

He chose a high-powered telephoto lens camera and checked to make sure it had film. Assured that it did, he took it into the house. The occasional flash of light testified to the collection of visual data.

Aileen waited just long enough for Thompson to ascertain that neither Mykil nor she had been inside the domicile in question, before she asked when she could go in and see the extent of the damage. Officer Thompson assured her that she would be allowed in just as soon as Officer Albermyrel, Oceanside's only crime scene forensics specialist, had finished his photographic documentation and dusted for fingerprints.

Officer Albermyrel eventually came out of the house, walked to the trunk of the squad car, and returned the camera to its foam cutout. He pulled out a large plastic case that looked like a fisherman's tackle box, then went back inside the house.

"Officer Albermyrel is going to be a while. Dusting for prints is a time-consuming job. If you like, you can make a run down to the station and sign the complaint forms from the other night. You won't be allowed into the house for

at least an hour.” Officer Thompson looked at Aileen in a commiserating way, then took his leave and joined his partner inside the house.

“Complaint form?”

Aileen watched Bardell’s face change from shock to anger as Mykil informed him of the happenings of the other night.

“How am I supposed to protect you and your mate if I don’t have all the facts, Mykil? This Troy character is a human and could attempt to see Aileen or you during the day. I wouldn’t know that he’s a threat until he stood over the two of you. Unacceptable. I need to know of possible threats prior to that happening.” Bardell stomped over to the car and climbed in. “Are we going to the station so I can find out about this person and you can sign the complaints, or what?”

“I think we have offended poor Bardell, Mykil,” Aileen whispered.

“I would say that we have absolutely offended him. Let’s go smooth his feathers and do as he asks.”

Police stations are notorious for having people coming in and out of them at all hours, so taking the car made sense. If they flew, there would be the possibility that they could be seen landing outside the station.

The drive to the station took little time, and soon they stood in the entrance to the police headquarters. Oceanview might be a small town, but it apparently had its share of criminal elements. Even for a Monday night, the station looked packed. The reception area was filled with people who wandered around or sat in chairs, waiting for their turn to be seen.

She felt Mykil’s guard immediately go up. Aileen was carefully placed behind him; then he mentally directed Bardell to protect her from behind. He placed a tight, translucent bubble around her for her protection.

Aileen laughed. “Come on, caveman; let’s go talk to the desk sergeant.”

“It isn’t funny, Aileen. If something happened to you, I would probably snap. I’d be uncontrollable and would be a threat to the lives of my prey. I might be the most dangerous creature in the vicinity, but I won’t take the chance that some lower life form might approach you.” He murmured, so that only Aileen could hear him, “Just be mindful of the barrier. Don’t try to touch anyone except Bardell or me. He is inside the barrier and knows to stay close.”

Sticking two fingers through the back belt loop of Mykil's jeans, Aileen leaned against his back and nuzzled his neck. "I will, but you'll have to show me some really cool vampire evasion tactics to avoid getting hurt and to relieve your fears." Licking the ear she whispered into, she laughed deep in her throat when he shivered in reaction.

"Stop it, woman. Unless you don't mind all these people seeing your naked backside as I take you on the nearest desk." He reached his arm around her, and she giggled as he cupped the part of her anatomy he threatened to bare.

"Hey, you two. I thought we were here for a reason, not so that you can put on a show for the locals. If you want me to guard her backside, you are gonna have to take your hand off of it and get moving. This is not my idea of a great hangout."

Aileen smiled back at Bardell impishly, licked Mykil's ear one more time, and gave him a small push toward the reception desk. Keeping her fingers in his belt loop, she reached out and took Bardell's wrist with her other hand, pulling him along.

Mykil guided their little train to the front desk and asked to see the officer in charge of their case against Troy. Once they had received directions, the train maneuvered its way to the appropriate officer's desk.

Aileen shivered when she felt Mykil's fingers slide over her wrist as he pulled her hand free of his belt loop. In retaliation, she purposefully brushed her breast against his arm as he guided her to one of the chairs that faced the desk. She grinned evilly as he growled and took a sentry position behind and to the side of her chair, then motioned Bardell to take a like position at the other corner.

When the officer finally looked up to see who had invaded his area, he got the shock of his life. Two dark and extremely large men stood in obvious guard positions around a casually dressed, smiling brown-haired woman. The officer thought that she must be a celebrity who had a large enough following to warrant not only one, but two bodyguards. Aileen caught his thoughts and laughed aloud at his assumption.

"I'm Aileen Slipsworthy, and I've come to sign a complaint form against Troy Carey." When she caught the questioning look he directed toward Mykil, she shook her head. "The formidable-looking man on my right is my mate, Mykil Votad. And on my left is his bodyguard, Loris Bardell."

She smiled when Mykil placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed in an acknowledgement of her claiming him as her mate. Finally! I thought you would never say it.

Aileen placed one of her hands on his, then waited for the officer to close his mouth.

The officer introduced himself as Detective Arthers and started to stand, but he glanced up at Mykil, and something he saw there must have told him that shaking her hand in greeting was out. Nodding, he sat back in his chair and looked through a file on his desk.

While Mykil had relaxed his stance regarding his family approaching his mate and vice versa, he still considered outsiders a danger to Aileen and wouldn't tolerate them within arm's reach of her. Aileen felt Bardell's humor at Mykil's slight intimidation tactics on the detective. He knew why Mykil acted that way, but he wondered how Mykil tolerated having to let her feed. Aileen glanced questioningly at Mykil. Yes, Mr. Neanderthal, how do you manage it?

Mykil sent him a stern look for his thoughts, causing Aileen to laugh. Bardell cleared his throat and then resumed his guard-dog position.

If you must know, I have reinforced your control of your pey at all times. Your pey is not a danger to you, Mykil informed her and his curious man without taking his eyes off the officer in front of them or changing expressions.

Bardell cleared his throat again when Aileen gasped in mild outrage. Before she could light into Mykil for his highhandedness, she caught Bardell's thoughts. I wish we were already home so I could share tonight's experiences with Jonsie. She's going to be upset that she missed all this. Wonder what'll happen next? Life just gets more and more exciting these days.

Aileen felt the air shift as Mykil gave Bardell a mental whack on the back of the head for his insolence, and Bardell coughed. Hard. Aileen just rolled her eyes at the both of them.

Completely missing the byplay happening around him, Detective Arthers asked Bardell if he was all right.

"I think he got something caught in his throat." Like his foot. Bardell, behave yourself.

Aileen just laughed quietly at their antics.

While they waited for the detective to find the appropriate file, Aileen asked the question utmost in her mind. "Detective Arthers, is Troy still in custody?"

He checked the files in front of him. "Mr. Carey called his lawyer, and they released him within twelve hours of his arrest."

A low, animalistic growl emanated from Mykil, causing a complete silence to come over the squad room and many nervous hands to reach for sidearms. Aileen patted Mykil's hand soothingly, not that it helped much.

"Detective Arthers, someone broke into my home sometime between Troy Carey's arrest and this evening. Apparently, there is extensive damage to some of the rooms. I've been with Mykil since the arrest, and only became aware of the vandalism this evening. If Bardell hadn't gone to pick up a few of my personal things, we would still be in the dark about it." Aileen didn't want to contemplate the thought that, if she hadn't been with Mykil, Troy might have found her at home alone. If he could do the kind of damage to her things that she had heard Bardell describe to Officer Thompson, what might he have done to her if she had been there?

Aileen shivered at the thought. Mykil must have felt it, because he pulled her out of the chair. Sitting in it himself, he pulled her down on his lap and wrapped his arms around her waist. Aileen relaxed into his warmth and let it soothe her frayed nerves.

Bardell had moved to stand centered behind the chair.

The detective finished writing in the file, then turned the folder toward Aileen for her to sign when he had completed the update. "If you would just sign on the line marked with the X, I can make you a copy and you can get on with your evening. I'll be adding a copy of the description of the break-in that you discovered tonight, once the officer finishes typing it up. Also, I understand there is a restraining order. Do you have it with you?"

"It's in my house." She sighed. "Oh, I know. Get in touch with my lawyer. He has a copy on file. You have his number in the complaint report."

Quickly scanning the report for accuracy, she signed it and turned the file back to the detective. He took it and went to the copy machine.

Aileen turned and laid her head on Mykil's shoulder. "So we're assuming that Troy trashed my house?"

Rubbing her back with his hand, he nodded. "Since you don't know anyone else who has a grudge against you, I think we can safely say that Troy did it." Mykil looked down at her curiously. "He is the only one, right?"

"Yes, smarty. Troy is the only person who's mad at me right now." Wrapping her arms around his waist, she gave him a squeeze. Liking the position, she left them there.

Loud voices caught Aileen's attention. Two big bikers were being brought in under duress. They were heavily tattooed and wore leather vests, denim jeans, and steel-toed boots. Two officers escorted each prisoner toward processing, and it didn't look like an easy job as the men fought and shouted obscenities. More officers had started their way to help subdue the belligerent men, when one of the prisoners broke away from the officers holding him and made a run for the exit.

The receptionist at the front desk pushed a silent alarm connected to an electronic device that locked the front doors. The prisoner hit the doors running and bounced off them. Recovering admirably, he grabbed the nearest body to use as a shield.

The elderly lady he grabbed screamed, so he put one of his beefy hands across her mouth to shut her up. A young cop tried to jump the biker from the side and got entangled with the elderly lady. In the ensuing ruckus, the prisoner gained control of the officer's gun and waved it around, threatening the elderly woman with death if they didn't open the door.

Aileen had been teasing Mykil when the commotion began. She saw the big man run for the door, and when he bounced off of it, she laughed, remembering her own experience with Mykil's barrier. But when he grabbed the old lady, she jumped out of Mykil's lap and headed into the fray before he could catch her.

"Aileen, no! Don't you dare get involved with this." Mykil bolted out of the chair and tried to catch her. Bardell followed right behind Mykil.

Moving quickly, so Mykil and Bardell couldn't stop her, Aileen walked right up to the angry man. He immediately pointed the gun into her face. Using the

movie vampire trick on him, she latched on to his mind and gently put her hand over the top of the gun.

She heard Mykil's thoughts coming through, loud and clear. I'm going to have a heart attack. You're nuts, and you're going to drive me there, too. He reinforced her mental control over the man and vowed, When this is over, I'm going to spank your bottom. I don't need this kind of stress. I'm too damn old for these kinds of hijinks.

"Please, let the lady go. She didn't do anything to you and doesn't deserve to be scared like this." Aileen gave him a little mental push to do as she asked.

She could feel the heat of Mykil's body as he slowly placed himself directly behind her. The color gradually deepened around her as the shield between the biker who held the old woman and herself strengthened, and her push on the biker became amplified.

Slowly, the man let the elderly woman go. Aileen watched as an officer carefully took the hand of the old woman and pulled her away. All the officers around them had their guns drawn, and Mykil hovered, ready to pounce. Aileen could hear him mentally cursing. She was amazed at the colorful images that his curses brought to mind.

Aileen looked up at the large man. "Why don't you set the gun down?" She smiled sweetly into the man's eyes while giving him another mental push.

I'm taking her home and locking her in the underground room. She'll never see the sky again. No, better yet, I'm going to tie her to the bed and keep her there. If she complains, I'll gag her. Never, do you understand? You'll never get untied. She smiled and ignored Mykil's grumpiness, knowing he would get over it. Oh, no, I won't! You wait and see. Just as soon as we get home ...

Watching the man lower the gun to the floor at a turtle's pace, Aileen began to back up, right into Mykil's arms. Pulling out of the man's mind the second he let go of the gun, she turned as three police officers tackled him to the ground and subdued him. Mykil began pulling her away from the action and scolded her. Loudly.

Halfway back, Mykil bodily picked her up and hauled her over to the chair that was in front of Detective Arthers' desk. Dropping her to her feet, he sat in the chair, then dragged her into his lap before she could move away.

Aileen squealed and started to squirm, but Mykil was ignoring her. He held her so tightly, she couldn't catch her breath.

Bardell took up his sentry position behind the chair and looked around. Now that the situation was under control, everyone went back to what they had been doing before all the excitement started.

Detective Arthers returned to his desk and sat down. Aileen felt his eyes on them, and when she looked up, he was shaking his head. For some reason, he looked up at Bardell and asked his question. "After the crime scene investigator gets done with his investigation, does Miss Slipsworthy wish us to send a copy to her lawyer? I will be contacting him to get the restraining order information, and I could fax that to him then."

"Do that. Send copies of both the incidents to Mr. Votad's lawyer, as well, if you would, please." Giving Detective Arthers the information on Mykil's lawyer, Bardell took the signed copy of the complaint form. Placing his hand on Mykil's shoulder, Bardell bent over and informed Mykil that they had finished and could leave.

With her still in his arms, Mykil stood and carried Aileen out of the station and into the car. He held on to her tightly during the drive back to the house. She enjoyed the closeness, his scent, his strength. None of them said a word the whole trip. Laying her head on his chest, she listened to his heart beating. The steady pounding relaxed her and nearly caused her to fall asleep.

The car stopped, and still carrying Aileen, Mykil entered the house. She blinked repeatedly when they went in, and she shook her head to knock some of the cobwebs out, but Mykil didn't put her down as she had expected. Without stopping, he strode purposefully toward the parlor, entered it, then kicked the door shut.

"Mykil?"

He shushed her and walked over to the couch, sat down, and adjusted Aileen so she sat comfortably in his lap.

Looking into her eyes, he asked softly, "You know why this has to be done, don't you?"

"Wha--" Before she could complete her question, Mykil lifted her, flipped her over, and returned her to his lap, face down.

Aileen shrieked and started to squirm because when Mykil pulled her into his lap this time, it wasn't for her to sit. "Aughhh! Don't you dare spank me, Mykil!"

WHAP!

"Aughhh! You are gonna pay for this!" Aileen tried to wiggle off his lap, to no avail.

WHAP!

"You scared the hell out of me, and I won't tolerate you being in danger!"

She couldn't believe Mykil had the nerve to spank her, much less try to justify it. Sheesh, she was a grown woman, responsible for herself. She didn't deserve to be treated like a child. Ridiculous! And what was with the lightning already? Good grief! Both times his hand had connected with her jeans-clad bottom, electricity had started right after the initial sting. She could feel herself getting wetter and wetter. If this went on too much longer, she would probably come.

WHAP!

Mykil lifted Aileen from her face-down position and sat her in his lap, which stung her flaming ass cheeks even more. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her neck. "Never, never, ever do something that dangerous again. I've never been so scared in my life."

Aileen wiped the tears from her face. She hadn't really been crying, but those three spanks HURT. Noticing Mykil's upset and hearing what he said soothed her wounded pride. Actually, rubbing the abused area with his hand helped, too. Aileen wrapped her arms around Mykil's neck and soothed him. Oh, sure, I get a spanking and I end up soothing him. God, I must be in love. Blinking, she thought about what had just passed through her mind. That would explain so much about her wait-and-see attitude. Oh, man, I hope he isn't reading me now. The time for him to find out is not right after he spans me. And another thing, if he thinks he's gonna get away with this, he has another think coming!

Mykil shook off most of his anger and fear and started listening to Aileen's thoughts again. He had been so caught up in his own emotions that he only caught her last threatening thoughts. He didn't care that she planned to retaliate; he was just glad she hadn't been hurt.

“Aileen ...” He stopped and tried to organize his thoughts. It didn’t work, so he just went on. “Aileen, you can’t do things like that anymore. Please.”

Aileen leaned back and looked into his eyes. “I really don’t appreciate you spanking me as if I were a child.”

“I was afraid I would lose you.” Suddenly, he felt his face spread into a sly, knowing grin. “Don’t act like you hated it. I caught your reaction to those baby swats. I bet it wouldn’t take very much to bring you over.” He brought his mouth down to hers and kissed her as he’d been wanting to ever since he had finished spanking her.

As if losing herself in the kiss, Aileen leaned into him. Pressing her chest to his, she opened her mouth and allowed him access. He reveled in the sensation of twining his tongue with hers. She slid her hand under his shirt. Rubbing slow circles on his chest with her hand, she caught his moan in her mouth.

Not wanting to move from his position, he threw a thought at the door to lock it. He wanted no interruptions for a while.

Trailing kisses across Aileen’s face and down her neck, he slid his hand around her waist to the buttons that ran down the front of her shirt. Slowly he unbuttoned her blouse, then slid his hand to her breast. Then he pushed the cup of her bra to the side and ran his hand across her nipple just to feel it peak. As he rubbed it between his fingers and thumb, he could feel her purr. He liked that sound, so he made her do it again.

Aileen had unbuttoned his shirt, and as he watched helplessly, she ran her hands over the contours of his chest, shoulders, and stomach. “I wonder ...” she murmured, then ran her fingers over his nipples.

A cold chill ran across Mykil’s chest when she twisted them hard enough to send a sharp jolt of electricity shooting to his cock. Surprised when he shivered at the exquisite feel of it, he leaned back and looked at Aileen’s face. Her eyes were large and staring curiously at his chest, watching what her hands had accomplished. He lost control for a moment as a small smile caressed her lips. He growled in his chest and lifted her up to latch his mouth onto her nipple. Reaching between her breasts, he flicked open the catch of her bra. Using both hands, he pushed the cups away and dragged his tongue across her taut nipple.

Aileen raised herself up on her knees and wrapped her arms around his head. She tensed, then arched toward him, apparently losing herself in the feeling of

him teasing her nipple with his tongue. And it didn't look like she would let him stop until she was ready. Mykil sucked her into his mouth, hard. When she tightened her arms around his head and pressed his face harder to her, he nipped it lightly with his teeth, then switched breasts and gave the other a similar treatment.

Aileen's hand touched his chin, and the soft fingers pushed against him, removing his mouth from her body. Dazed, he looked up into her glassy eyes. Ready to complain over the loss of his treat, he relaxed when she leaned back toward him and took his mouth with her own. A slight pain erupted in his head when her hands fisted in his hair, causing him to grunt. He slid his hands down her waist to the fastening of her pants. Blindly undoing the button and zipper of her jeans, he ran his hands into the waistband of her pants and panties and tightly gripped the cheeks of her ass.

He felt her legs relax so she could straddle his lap. Helping her get situated comfortably, he groaned softly as she reached down to undo the fastenings of his pants, then smiled when she broke the kiss and glared at him. Looking down, he saw she had become frustrated when she couldn't unbutton more than the top button.

Chuckling at her attitude, he got a firmer grip on her bottom and stood. Lightly setting her feet on the ground, he raised an eyebrow. "Will that be enough, or do you need more assistance?"

He loved the pursed-lip look she gave him, and forgoing an answer, she undid his pants and slid them around his knees, taking his underwear with them. Pushing on his chest, she caused him to break his contact with her bottom, and he fell to the couch. Shimmying out of her own pants, she froze, looking stymied when her pants bunched up at her ankles and wouldn't come off. Muttering under her breath, she wiggled and squirmed. Still stuck. "Fuckshittedamn." She glanced up and growled when Mykil chuckled, causing both of his eyebrows to rise. "You're not helping." She toed off her shoes and kicked off her jeans and panties. Reaching down, Aileen hastily removed his shoes and pulled off his pants and underwear.

Both still wore their undone shirts and their socks. Aileen also had on her bra, which was hanging loose by the straps. Mykil smiled sexily when she proclaimed that they had removed enough clothes. She climbed onto his lap facing him and, with his minimal assistance, filled herself with him.

They both sighed heavily as her tight pussy slid down the length of him. His eyes slid closed, and Aileen placed her hands back in his hair. Finding a slow, deep rhythm, she leaned back, and Mykil put his mouth on her body, laving her breasts.

Placing his hands on her ass, he assisted in keeping her rhythm steady. She was so hot and tight, if she sped up even just a little bit, he would explode. He didn't want that to happen yet. He wanted to savor her. Yes. Savoring was good. He could feel her slick walls sliding the length of him over and over. Oh, gods! And over. Sliding his lips up her chest to her neck was involuntary. He had to taste her. Licking her at her pulse point, he sank his teeth gently into her. Sipping lightly, he felt her climax begin. Tightening on him, he could feel the tremors deep inside her body. Ah, yesss! he heard her sigh into his mind.

Lightly licking the wound he'd made on her neck, he was surprised when she tightened her arms around his neck and brought her mouth to his throat. Sliding her on his still-hard staff with his hands at her bottom, he felt her sink her teeth into him. Catching his breath at the lightning that flashed from that point to his thrusting manhood, he slid his hands to her waist and pulled her down on him hard. Again and again he pounded her down on him while she drank from him. He couldn't stop the explosion that overtook him. Gritting his teeth and cursing silently, he emptied himself into her.

The soft rasp of her tongue as she tenderly licked the mark she'd left on his neck caused him to shiver in aftershock. He heard her giggle, and when he raised a questioning eyebrow at her, she laid her head on his shoulder. "I think I gave you a hickey."

Mykil snorted. "I'm never going to be able to move again, and you're worried about a little hickey? I'm more worried about Jonsie coming in here to dust and I'm as naked as a newborn. Do you think she'd be shocked?"

"After she got an eyeful, she would tell you to get your lazy self up and do something constructive. I haven't known her long, but what I do know tells me that she would take no nonsense from the likes of you." She kissed him lightly, then slid off of him. He scrutinized her naked, sweaty body as she sighed and looked down at him. "I suppose we should go by my house and find out the extent of the damage."

Mykil cracked one eye open and watched as Aileen gathered their clothes. She set his on the couch next to him and began to put hers on.

“Can’t we just stay here and take a nap? You must remember my age. I’m no young fellow who can just jump up and run around after having my head blown off.”

Aileen didn’t seem impressed. “Get up. You can take your nap later. Right now we have things to do.” Dressed, she headed for the door. “I’ll tell Bardell and Jonsie where we’re headed. You get dressed and meet me in the kitchen.” With those parting words, she left the room.

Mykil shook his head sadly. “It must be because she hasn’t read the relationship manual that she doesn’t understand that she isn’t supposed to be the dominant one in regards to sex. I feel so used.” Breaking into a huge grin, he stood and dressed. “I love it.”

Aileen entered the kitchen and looked around. “Wow! What a room.” She had followed the voices, and now that she had seen it, knew why everyone hung out here. “Jonsie, this room is great.”

Jonsie and Bardell sat at the table, enjoying a cup of coffee. They looked up when she entered, smiled, and invited her to join them at the table.

Aileen sat and looked around the room in fascination. “Do you know, I’ve always wanted a kitchen that looked like this, not that I’d be able to put it to good use. I suck as a chef; that’s why I write. I needed to make enough so that I can eat out often.”

The three were laughing when Mykil joined them. He walked up to where Aileen sat, took her hand, pulled her from the seat, sat down, and tugged her onto his lap. Once they were comfortably situated, he asked what everyone was laughing at.

“Is there something wrong with that chair over there?” Aileen pointed to the empty chair on the other side of the table.

“Yes.”

“Oh, really? And what could possibly be wrong with it?”

“You weren’t in it. Now, tell me what you were laughing at, woman, and it had better not have been at my expense.” His pronouncement caused everyone at the table to burst out laughing again.

“What an ego. We weren’t even talking about you. I was telling Jonsie that I loved her kitchen and that, although I would have loved to have one just like it, I’d have never been able to use it to its potential. So there, Mr. Paranoid. Not a word about you at all.” She made a face at him, then squealed when he poked her in the side.

“And why weren’t you talking about me? As the most important being in your life, you should have nothing else on your mind besides me.”

“All right. You’ll be the only thing on my mind. You’ll be the only thing I talk about.” Intercepting his smirk, she grabbed his bottom lip. “But ... don’t blame me if all of my thoughts and words are derogatory.”

Bardell and Jonsie were laughing when Mykil placed his hands on the side of Aileen’s head and brought her mouth to his and kissed the sass right out of her.

When she finally managed to collect her scattered thoughts, she turned to Bardell. “So, how did you meet Mykil? I’d like to get to know you.”

Bardell shook his head and looked at Mykil. “Should I tell her? How we met, I mean?”

“Of course.” Mykil turned her so that her back leaned comfortably against his for the story.

“I guess you could call me Mykil’s man. In the past I’d have been his valet or something, but in today’s vernacular, I’m a jack of all trades. Because Mykil can’t be available during the better part of the day, I take care of anything that needs immediate attention. I’m also Mykil’s bodyguard. No one is allowed in the house unsupervised while Mykil sleeps. You, Aileen, are now under that protection, as well.”

“Bardell is the type of man who would die trying to protect us, Aileen.”

She gasped. “Why on earth would you do that, Bardell?”

“Mykil saved my life many years ago. I had been working as a manager at a Las Vegas casino that was hit by a group of well-organized thieves. I’d been taken to the cashier’s office and held at gunpoint with the people who were already in there, waiting for the police to grant safe passage to the thieves. Mykil, one of the owners, traded himself as a hostage in exchange for the women. Once the women had been freed, Mykil looked around the room, and

everyone but me went to sleep. At the time I didn't understand what had happened, but he soon gained control of the situation."

Mykil broke in. "I had simply entered their minds and knocked them out. But Bardell here is immune to the hypnotism and remembered everything that happened. I turned the thieves over to the police and freed the hostages, but I held on to Bardell. I probed into his psyche and found that he was a good man. Loyal. So instead of outright killing him, I hired him on as my personal manager and passed off the hypnotism as a trick I'd learned. Over the years I came to trust him more and more, until a couple of years ago when he saved my life in return."

Bardell picked the story back up from here. "By that time, I had surmised exactly what manner of man Mykil was and had decided it made no difference in how I felt about him."

Mykil jumped in with his own comment. "One day a hunter penetrated the house I slept in. When I awoke, I found Bardell calmly making arrangements to dispose of the hunter's body. He nonchalantly informed me that 'the matter had been taken care of, and not to bother myself about it.' Can you believe the balls on this man? I moved him into the house that night."

Bardell cleared his throat, looking embarrassed when Aileen gasped.

"Holy mackerel. Thank goodness nobody was hurt!"

"Tell me about it," Jonsie blurted. "The next morning, Bardell and I got new security devices put on all the houses. That was a close one, I tell you."

Bardell stood. "Well, if you two are ready, I'm going to head to Aileen's house, and I'll meet you there."

* * * * *

They made it to Aileen's house in record time. Mykil took Aileen's hand as they flew toward the house.

Aileen felt an interesting hum pass through her body, causing her to stop and look around. Mykil looked directly at the two vampires who landed nearby.

Johann and Alexi walked up to the couple.

Johann spoke first. “What are you doing at this house?”

“This is my house,” Aileen informed them. “What are you doing here?”

Alexi looked at Johann, then Johann turned to Mykil. “There’s a rogue vampire in the area, and we’ve been following his signature trail all night. We didn’t invite you because we thought you wouldn’t want to be separated from your mate, but now ...”

Alexi finished for Johann. “Mykil, we’ve followed the trail directly to your mate’s house.”

Chapter Nine

Aileen looked around the yard. “And just what would a -- did you call him a rogue vampire? -- want at my house?”

Mykil glanced at the house, then at Aileen. “I don’t know.” He looked questioningly at his friends. “Any ideas?”

Johann shook his head. “If he found out about Aileen ... but that doesn’t make any sense. Why he would come here and not to your house, Mykil?”

Alexi crossed his arms. “What if we just go inside, find out what he looked at, and go from there?”

Entering the house, Aileen was shocked at the devastation that had been wrought. The couch and chairs had been slashed and overturned. The tables were kindling, and every breakable item was shattered. She had to speak aloud, simply to believe what she saw, “Look at the living room. It’s littered with papers and broken glass. How am I going to find anything?” The pictures that had hung on the wall, and the ones that had been sitting on the fireplace mantel, were all on the floor. She caught her breath on a sob. They’d been stepped on, and the pictures were scratched. The lamps that had been sitting on the end tables were now on the floor by a wall, shattered. Even the throw pillows had been shredded.

That wasn’t the entirety of the destruction. The screen on her television had been either punched or kicked in. It had a huge hole with cracks spider-webbed out from the center of the screen. Her VCR lay on the floor, resembling a boomerang. Aileen wondered how that could have been accomplished, then lost the thought as she noticed her VHS tape collection.

Over the years she had collected an impressive number of movies on tape. Now there were very few left. They had all been destroyed in one manner or another. Some had been broken in half; some had had the ribbons pulled out of the cases like yarn from a ball.

There were even holes in the walls. A fist had caused at least three of the holes. Aileen couldn’t identify the source of the other holes.

She looked around in dismay. She turned to go to the other rooms of the house to see what else had been destroyed, but Mykil stopped her.

“In a moment, dear heart. First, we must follow his movements. Stand near me and open your senses.” Mykil wrapped one arm around her shoulders and closed his eyes.

Alexi and Johann placed themselves in the room so that they stood in a triangular configuration, with Mykil and Aileen making one point of the triangle. Aileen opened her senses as Mykil had taught her.

Aileen could feel the humming at many different layers and pitches. She could pick out Mykil’s hum, Alexi’s hum, and Johann’s hum. She took those out and mentally set them aside. What she had left was a high-pitched, grit-your-teeth, pain-inducing hum.

Aileen guessed that the painful hum was from the rogue vampire. It only passed by a couple of the broken items in the room and then returned to the front door. “Whoever this rogue is, he didn’t make the mess,” Aileen ventured.

“Agreed. Very good, Aileen; you’re getting the hang of it.” Mykil hugged her to his side. “Now, push aside the rogue’s hum, and you’ll be able to tell who did make the mess.”

Aileen concentrated on pushing the painful resonance aside and noticed a dull, tinny scent. “I smell blood. Is that right?”

“Blood scents are human markers. Vampire blood is different than human, and the human blood leaves a trail for vampires to follow when we are hunting. Concentrate carefully, and you will be able to tell whose it is, as long as you have met the human. And this human, you have met.”

Aileen concentrated and sniffed the air. Troy! “Well, that confirms it. What I don’t understand is what he wanted. Could he have been looking for something, or was he just out to trash the place?”

None of the men seemed to have an answer.

“Perhaps he was after the restraining order,” Mykil offered.

“He isn’t very bright when it comes to legalities. That would be just his speed, thinking that the copy I have is the only one available. We can look around for it.”

Alexi broke the triangle and Aileen's concentration. "Mykil, the area is clear of threat. Johann and I will resume our hunt for the rogue's signature." He bowed to Aileen, and the two vampires quickly left them.

"Aileen, let's just look around and see what he concentrated on. We need to check on your family mementos while we're at it. I also think that a visit to our mutual friend is in order." He lightly kissed her on the lips and turned her toward the office.

As Aileen stumbled over the remains of her living room, she was really glad that she hadn't been home while Troy had been there. Judging by the destruction of her home, he had gone nuts.

Stepping into her office, she gasped. It looked like a war zone. The destruction was absolute. Troy's blood scent felt strongest in this room. He'd spent a lot of time in it.

"Look at my computer! He must have been insane to throw my monitor at the wall. There are cracks in the plaster. My computer case! He ripped it open! Where is my hard drive? Mykil, he took my hard drive. I guess we know one thing he was after." Aileen shook her head, trying to hold back her tears.

The shelves that she had filled with reference materials, encyclopedias, dictionaries, thesauruses, and many other books had been emptied and broken. Each and every book had pages ripped from the bindings. Papers were scattered all over the office, ankle deep. The surface of Aileen's desk was empty. Deep gouges had been dug into it with a letter opener, forming the words: BITCH, SLUT, and TEASE.

Aileen wondered how she could be a slut while also being a tease. Shaking her head at the unfathomable destruction, she turned to Mykil. "What now?"

"Perhaps you should send every little bit of data on the books you're working on to your agent. That way, if he tries to claim it as his own work, you have proof with Deborah." Mykil looked at the devastation. "I'm glad I took all your books home." He gathered up the more intact of her reference books, and she heard him make a mental note to replace the ones that she had lost.

"Come on, Aileen; let's check out your room." He held the door for her, waited for her to pass, then closed the door so she couldn't see the mess.

They carefully walked over the disaster in the hall and entered her bedroom. They sighed in relief when they saw that Troy hadn't made it into this room. Her room was exactly the way she had left it.

"Here's my treasure chest." She put her hand on the chest with the dragon engraved upon it. "It hasn't been touched."

Mykil took Aileen's hand. "I'll have Jonsie and Bardell come in the morning and collect the things that survived the assault. As a matter of fact, Bardell should have been here by now."

"Yes, he said he would meet us here. Do you think something happened to him?" Aileen headed out of the room, deciding that nothing could be done about her things at the moment and Bardell took precedence. She headed for the front of the house with Mykil following.

"How do we find Bardell? He said he carries a cell phone, but the phone in my house is destroyed. Can you call him?" She stepped out of the house and watched while Mykil locked the door.

"No, I don't carry one. I used to, but I was getting calls night and day. E-mail has been working fine for my position as Midas, but now that you mention it, it would be a good idea if I ordered cell phones for the four of us living at the house. Unfortunately, that doesn't help us now. We're going to have to go back home and call him. If that doesn't work, we'll start at his last known location and follow his blood scent." Mykil waited until Aileen lifted from the ground; then they both headed for home.

Soon they landed at Mykil's house. While Mykil called Bardell's number, Aileen questioned Jonsie about the last time she had seen Bardell. Mykil told them he'd gotten a busy signal, and she found out Jonsie hadn't seen him since the four of them had been in the kitchen together. They grabbed jackets and headed for the garage. Inside they found that the car Bardell preferred driving was missing.

"I didn't see it anywhere outside or even on the way here from my house. Did you?" Aileen put her hand in Mykil's, needing the closeness.

"No. Let's find his blood scent and see where it leads us, shall we?" He tightened his grip, tilted his nose to the sky, and found Bardell's scent.

They took to the air, following the road toward town. Halfway to Aileen's, they smelled human blood.

"This has got to be the weirdest night of my life," Aileen stated. "I feel like a hound dog -- a bloodhound, to be specific -- and I know who is with Bardell. Bet you'll never guess who it is." Sighing heavily, Aileen looked at Mykil, who stared at the ground. "What do you see?"

"It looks like Bardell stopped to help someone who was lying on the ground at the side of the road. See here, the grass is pressed flat. Bardell must have seen someone and stopped to offer assistance." He reached down and picked up a broken cell phone. Mykil sniffed the air. "If one hair on Bardell's head is harmed, Troy won't have to worry about jail."

"Bardell will be just fine, Mykil. Let's go find him." Aileen gave Mykil a hug and followed Bardell's scent toward town.

On the way, Mykil and Aileen debated the reasons why Troy might have taken Bardell. Payback or ransom, perhaps, but the speculating wasn't doing them any good, so they dropped the subject and continued to follow the scent.

The trail led them to a small bungalow cottage behind the only hotel in town. As they headed toward the front door, Johann and Alexi joined them yet again.

Aileen looked at the two men in surprise. "This can't be good. Please don't tell me that you followed the scent of the rogue here."

"Okay, we won't." Johann winked at Aileen and turned to Mykil. "Did you follow the human?"

"Actually, we're following Bardell's scent. He never showed up at Aileen's, and we got worried. Along the way, though, it seems that he met up with our buddy Troy and came here."

"Not good." Alexi rubbed the bridge of his nose. "So what we have here is one human friend, one human foe, and one rogue vampire. All possibly inside this building."

Mykil glared at the building. "It would seem so. However, we do have the advantage. There are three of us."

“And what am I? Chopped liver?” Aileen stood with her hands on her hips and glared at the three men.

“You are not going to be involved in this, Aileen.” Mykil glared at her. “You’ll stay out here where I know you won’t get hurt.”

“Mykil ...” Aileen started to argue, only to have Mykil pick her up and haul her away from the bungalow.

“Woman, don’t argue with me about this, please. I want you to stay right here on the hotel’s porch, and if anyone besides the three of us comes out of that bungalow door, I want you to run into the hotel.” He set her down on the porch and waited.

“And just what makes you think I can’t handle myself?” She returned his glare, measure for measure.

“Dear heart, I have been fighting rogues and humans for centuries. You, on the other hand, have been a vampire for less than a week. Now, ask me again why I’m worried for your safety.” Mykil wrapped his arms around Aileen’s waist and leaned his forehead on hers. “Please do as I ask. Later you can yell at me for treating you like a helpless female, but for now stay out of harm’s way so I can concentrate on what has to be done.”

Sighing, Aileen nodded her consent. Mykil kissed her on the nose and let her go. He joined the waiting men surrounding the cottage, blocking all obvious exits. Mykil mentally checked that Johann and Alexi had taken their positions, then knocked on the door.

He heard a scuffling sound, and the door opened. When Troy saw who stood at the door, he tried to slam it closed. Mykil put his hand on the door and pushed. As it swung inward, it hit Troy right in the face, and he staggered backwards away from the door. When Troy pulled his hands away from his face, his nose was bleeding again.

“What is it with you? Whenever you see me, you break my nose!” Troy screamed at Mykil.

Troy didn’t notice the other two men join them, but Mykil did.

After checking the bungalow for any other beings, Johann and Alexi came into the room and took casual positions leaning against the walls.

Mykil looked at the two men and raised a brow, and both shook their heads to indicate that he'd been alone. Mykil looked back at Troy. "Shut up, Troy, and answer some questions for me."

Troy shot Mykil a dirty look. "I don't have to do shit."

Mykil looked over Troy's shoulder and smiled at his friends.

Troy looked in that direction and paled. He stomped over to the couch, sat down, and laid his head on the back of the couch. "Ask your damn questions; then get the hell out."

Mykil nodded. "Why did you wreck Aileen's house?" He had decided to start with the easy stuff and work his way to the important things. Giving him a little mental push, Mykil pulled out the truth.

"Aileen is a cold-blooded bitch and deserved to have it happen to her. She owes me, and I'm gonna get the money out of her. What do you care, anyway? It isn't like she's gonna put out or anything, because she's the proverbial Ice Princess. You couldn't warm her up with a blowtorch." Troy grabbed a pillow, propped it on the back of the couch, and laid his head on it, glaring at Mykil.

Mykil just smiled, while Alexi and Johann laughed aloud. Johann muttered something about Mykil not needing a blowtorch, just a haystack. The two friends subsided when Mykil shot them pointed looks.

"What did you do with Aileen's hard drive?" Mykil hoped that by returning the missing part of her computer, she would go easy on him later for making her wait outside.

Don't count on it, mister. Mykil could hear the laughter in Aileen's voice as she sent the rebuke.

"It's in the bedroom in the top drawer. Not that it'll do you any good. She's passworded the thing from here to kingdom come. I tried everything I could think of and couldn't crack it; what do you think you're gonna do with it?" Troy grabbed a tissue off the coffee table and pressed it to his nose.

You bet you sweet bippy that I passworded it. I started doing that when Troy stated spending time at my place in L.A. I wasn't sure he even knew how to use a computer and didn't want him playing with mine. I was afraid he would crash it.

Aileen. Would you let me handle this without having to listen to you asides every two seconds? The guys can hear you and are starting to laugh. How are we supposed to make Troy think we're hard-asses if they're laughing their heads off? Mykil grinned fiercely and mentally pinched her on her ass.

Hey! Fine! I'll stay out of this, but I'm still gonna listen in. Aileen quieted down and let Mykil run the show.

Shaking his head in despair, Mykil motioned to Johann to go get the hard drive. Johann went into the bedroom and returned with the drive in his hand.

"Now for the important questions." Mykil went to the couch to loom threateningly over Troy. "Where is Loris Bardell?"

"Who?"

"The man who stopped to help you a little while ago. I hope you don't plan to deny it." Mykil pushed a little harder. He needed to find him soon. A bad feeling had started creeping into his mind, permeating this whole situation with doom and gloom.

"Oh, that guy. I didn't know his name. He only told me to get whoever left your house and bring them here to him." Troy nodded his head as if he had imparted well-known information.

"Who told you to do that, Troy?" Mykil had to control himself. He could feel his eyes starting to turn red and his teeth beginning to grow.

"That big redheaded dude that never gave me his name told me I had to grab someone coming from your house. He didn't say why, and I didn't ask. I brought the old guy here, and he took the old guy somewhere else." Troy glared at Mykil. "I needed the money and fast, so I did what that guy wanted. It's all Aileen's fault. If she had given me the money, I wouldn't have had to snatch anyone." Shaking his head, he groaned as piercing pain caused him to remember his nose.

Mykil glared at Troy, then looked at his friends. They nodded and left the room the same way they had come in -- quietly. Mykil looked at Troy and gave him a final warning. "Listen to me, Troy. Aileen belongs to me now. Harm her, and I'll kill you. Touch anything else that belongs to her, I'll kill you. You'll stay away from everything and everyone who belongs to me. Got it?"

“What do you mean, Aileen belongs to you?”

“Just what I said. Let’s just say that Aileen is my wife and leave it at that.”

“That bitch got married to you after knowing you, what, a couple of months? She wouldn’t marry me after leading me on for a hell of a lot longer than that.” Troy got off the couch and started shouting. “It just isn’t fair!”

Mykil decided that telling him Aileen had known him for only a couple of days would be too much, so he left Troy to his ranting and closed the door behind himself. He walked over to the porch where he had left Aileen. Looking at her where she stood, several steps up, he sighed. “If I asked you, would you go home and wait for us there?”

As expected, she shook her head. Johann handed Aileen her hard drive and took to the air; Alexi followed him. Mykil wondered why he couldn’t have gotten a submissive mate, then laughed as he ducked Aileen’s fist.

“Come, woman, we have to find Bardell. But you must follow my directions exactly. Agreed?” Mykil held Aileen in his arms until he received her answer.

“Yes, dear. I’ll do as you ask.” Aileen scrunched her nose. “You know, I think with a little work, you’ll make someone a good husband.”

After soundly whacking her bottom for her teasing, he grasped her hand, laughing, and took to the air in pursuit of Alexi and Johann.

The laughter didn’t last long, because their worry for Bardell took precedence.

“What constitutes a rogue vampire?” They were pursuing the vampire’s signature hum out of town when she posed the question.

“A rogue is a vampire who kills indiscriminately. While most males have killed at some time or another, whether in wars or plain old revenge, rogues kill just because they can. They kill their prey and will leave the body so that the authorities can find it and question the cause of death. So, like rabid dogs, they must be put down before they expose our kind. Vampires like the anonymity of being considered a myth. We don’t want verification supplied to the authorities.” Mykil checked that she understood. “Separately, we have common and not-so-common criminals who are cast out of the safety of the vampire collective and are eventually caught and killed. There are no prisons that can hold a vampire, so these outcasts must be exterminated.

“There is also a militant human commune; its sole purpose is to track and kill all vampires. We aren’t sure how they first came by the knowledge that vampires are real, but they’ve spent centuries hunting us. They call themselves the Pocatsu.” Mykil shook his head. “I’ve heard stories of the humans storming a vampire’s home like war ants. Swarming.”

Aileen gulped at the picture he wove.

“Vampires also have their own support group. It’s called the Society and is run a little like a Viking ‘thing.’ However, unlike the yearly ‘thing,’ we have gatherings every ten years. During the gathering, you can bring up your problems. Any complaint that you have against another vampire is heard, judged, and ruled upon. Decisions are final. If you have killed a vampire in the previous decade, you’d better have a good reason, because this is judged, as well. Matings and births are recognized.”

They had been flying inland, passing forest, towns, and open fields. The signature trail led them toward the mountains.

Up ahead, Alexi and Johann slowed. When Mykil and Aileen caught up with them, the four vampires landed at the edge of a hundred square miles of mountainous terrain.

“Damn, this is going to take us a while,” Johann grumbled, looking at the mountains. “We’re going to have to split up to search a wider area. These damn mountains confuse the senses, and I can barely follow the trail.”

Alexi nodded slowly. “This may take more time than the night gives us. If we haven’t found his lair before the dawn, find a place to hole up for the day, and we will meet up again at dusk. Is this good for you?”

Mykil nodded and so did Johann. Aileen shrugged. She was going with Mykil, will he or nil he. The men agreed to have hourly mental check-ins, and if anyone saw or felt anything strange, to check in immediately.

They split up, and Mykil and Aileen spent the last three hours until dawn scouring the mountains for the rogue and Bardell. They felt traces on occasion, but time was lost on disappearing threads and backtracking.

Whenever one man found the trail, he called to the others; they converged on that spot and then split up again to search. Just before dawn, Mykil called a

halt, found a cave, and pulled Aileen into it. Deep in the bowels of the mountain, they stopped and found a comfortable place to sleep.

“What about the others?” Aileen wondered aloud.

“They’ve already found safe hideaways. Don’t worry about them.” Mykil lay down on the soft sand and pulled Aileen to him.

Snuggling into his side, with her head on his chest and an arm and leg wrapped around him, Aileen sighed. “Will we find Bardell, Mykil?”

He ran his hand down her braid soothingly. “Yes, love. Tomorrow we’ll find Bardell and dispose of the rogue.”

“Dispose? What do you mean dispose of him?”

“Aileen, I can’t let this rogue continue his ways. If he has become a killer, we must destroy him. I would kill him simply for taking Bardell, but that is against the Society’s rules.” Sliding his hand down, he rubbed her back. “I’m not an Enforcer; I’m Midas. But Alexi and Johann are in what you would call law enforcement. I’m a simple businessman; I oversee many of the Society’s investments and make sure they continue to make money. No vampire is ever in need of anything, because of my touch; they simply have to ask a ruling member of the Society, and they receive whatever it is they need. I’m called Midas because every thing I touch turns to gold.” Smirking, Mykil wagged his eyebrows rakishly.

“I can understand that. It’s not a good idea to let anyone do without. But you said that you can’t let this rogue continue.” Aileen looked up into Mykil’s eyes. “You said it as if you plan on killing him yourself.”

Mykil’s eyes flashed red, then back to normal. “When Alexi became head of the Enforcers, he made me a deputy. My position as Midas deals with vast quantities of currency, and I needed to be able to defend the investments and myself any way necessary. I have the ability, and the backing of the Society, to mete out punishments. I’ll do what I have to, Aileen. And you’ll stay safe while I’m doing it. Do you understand me?” His arms tightened around her. “You don’t understand that before you came to me, I didn’t know how it was to truly be whole. When we mated, I found the other half of my soul. If I lost you now, my mind would shatter and there would be the potential for me to go on destructive rampages, doing as much damage to everyone around me as possible until I was destroyed.”

Rolling Aileen onto her back, he aligned himself perfectly on top of her to feel each and every curve. "I won't survive losing you, so you have to take care of yourself. Please." He ran his hand down the front of her shirt, pausing for each button. The sides fell open, and he reached for the clasp between her breasts that held her bra together. Lowering his head, he softly ran his stubbly cheek across her breasts.

Aileen slid her hands up and unbuttoned his shirt, slipped her hands around his back caressing him, and murmuring assurances, she kissed his shoulders and neck.

Mykil took one tight nipple into his mouth and suckled it, causing her to shiver. He touched her mind with his and felt the ripples of pleasure travel the length of her body and center at the apex of her thighs. The sensation echoed in him.

She pulled his head up and took control of his mouth. Kissing him deeply, she slid her tongue against his and tasted him thoroughly as he tasted her in return.

Arching her back, she rubbed her swollen breasts against his body. He growled low in his chest, which must have enhanced the sensation to her nipples because a squeal of delight erupted from her.

Mykil liked that sound and planned on devoting years to making that noise come out of her. But right now, he busily worked at getting her pants undone and out of the way. Then, quickly shedding his own clothes, he slid between her legs and positioned his throbbing shaft at her moist entrance.

Looking deeply into her eyes, he pushed into her as far as he could go, then froze, savoring the feeling. Aileen felt as hot as a furnace and as tight as a glove. His own piece of perfection. Mykil began the slow, deep thrusts that would bring them both to completion.

Aileen gasped with each deep penetration, pressing kisses on his upper arms and chest. She ran her hands up and down his straining back and over his tight buttocks, causing him to shiver.

Deeper and harder he plunged into her body. Aileen closed her eyes, emitting a scream that seemingly erupted from her soul when she crested. Mykil reached his own pinnacle, shouting Aileen's name.

Wrapping his arms around her, Mykil rolled over onto his back, bringing Aileen on top of him without losing their intimate contact.

Aileen sleepily kissed his neck over and over. Mykil kissed the top of her head. "Sleep, love." As he constructed safeguards, she drifted off. Making a last mental check of the area, Mykil tightened his arms around his mate. Synchronizing his breathing with Aileen's, he took them both into deep sleep.

* * * * *

Mykil inhaled, scanning his surroundings. He still held Aileen on top of him, so he carefully rolled to his side and placed her on the ground. He kissed her mouth softly, gathered his clothes, and dressed.

Dropping the barriers, he made sure the area was clear, then leaned over to wake Aileen. "Wake, my love. It's dusk, and we have things to do."

Aileen woke, stretching and moaning. Slowly, she opened her eyes and she smiled at Mykil. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself. I hate to ruin the cuddly attitude you have, but you must get up. We'll have company soon, and if you don't want Alexi and Johann to have to spend the rest of their existence without their eyes, you'll have to put on your clothes."

"Ummm ..." Aileen murmured and snuggled closer to Mykil's broad chest. "Five more minutes."

Trying to sit with a clingy woman draped over him was difficult. Somehow he managed, then reached for her bra and shirt. "Sweetheart, you have to put these on. Now. Wake up and get dressed." He pulled her arms from around his neck and looked into her face. Her eyes were closed, and she had a small smile on her face.

Giving her a tiny shake, Mykil called her name until she opened her eyes. "Is it time to get up already?" Without waiting for a reply, she started to curl herself back into his chest.

"Aileen, wake up. Johann and Alexi will be here any minute, and you are as naked as the day you were born. Would you like for them to see you this way?"

Her eyes popped open, as he knew they would. "Oh, my gosh. Where are my clothes?" Like a toy with new batteries, she sprang into action, grabbing clothes and throwing them on. Soon she'd dressed and stood glaring at Mykil.

“What?” he asked defensively.

“I don’t appreciate being woken up like that. I find that my stress level when I wake up determines the stress level for the whole day. I like to wake up slowly. But now that I’m up, I’m ready for anything.” She didn’t look happy about it, though, causing Mykil to smile.

The others arrived, and they continued the hunt for Bardell and the rogue. Finally, during the darkest part of the night, they found his lair, a cave in the middle of the mountainous range. Standing at the mouth of the cave, Mykil created globes of light and sent them into the cave. They lit the cave a good way in, showing them the layout before they entered. Alexi mentally penetrated the cave. After ten minutes, he blinked and gave them a brief description. The cave was deep and had many offshoots, dead ends, and bottomless pits. For the male vampires it was challenging, and it would be more complex when they entered with their bodies. Aileen considered the whole situation a pain in the butt.

“As if hiding in the mountains wasn’t bad enough, he had to find the stinkiest, slimiest, coldest, ickiest cave around. If it had been a woman, she would have had the decency to find a place in town. At least the cold won’t get to us while wearing jackets.” She glared into the cave while the men huddled for a final strategy session.

“The concentrated vibrational hum of the rogue is here. This is definitely his lair. But I don’t think he’s in residence at the moment. Now would be the best time to infiltrate the lair and set up traps in preparation for his return,” Alexi said.

Mykil tried once again to get Aileen to stay in a safe place. When she declined, he sighed, and they headed for the entrance to the cave.

Chapter Ten

As she'd feared, the cave had green slimy stuff covering every surface she could see. The humidity was practically unbearable, and the stench! Rotten eggs in a garbage dump couldn't smell any worse.

"This rogue is smart," Alexi observed. "He knows that we can't follow Bardell's scent if we have to contend with this foul odor."

Holding one hand to his face, Johann made gagging noises and suggested that the rogue needed to die twice. "This is disgusting! How can anyone stay in here with this smell? My eyes are burning."

Mykil laughed at his friend's antics and took Aileen by the hand. "You two don't instill confidence. Aileen, remember when I told you their job titles? Don't you feel so safe now?" He laughed again and ducked when his friends tried to punch him.

Alexi and Johann led the way deeper into the cave. The passages reminded Aileen of an ant farm. Long, tubular tunnels, like straws, with offshoots everywhere. It was hard to tell which direction the rogue and Bardell had gone because they hadn't left footprints or markings of any kind to follow.

The four vampires followed the faintest traces of the painful hum that the rogue had left behind, all the while leaving a simple trail. Alexi bit his hand enough to cause a tiny amount of blood to appear. Any turns they made, Alexi would place his bloody hand on the wall. When they made a wrong turn, they knew after just a few steps. The hum would become softer. They would turn around and try another direction. When they returned to the last place Alexi had marked, Johann would put his own blood mark over it. For a vampire this was better than leaving string as a trail marker.

Mykil helped Aileen follow the faint tracings of the hum that were still present, while Alexi and Johann warned the couple of pitfalls and any other danger they encountered along the way. Scorpions, snakes, and bats seemed to be hiding everywhere. One wrong step on a slippery slope could toss someone headlong into a pit with a jagged bottom. While it wouldn't kill the vampires, Mykil told her, it would do enough damage to require blood. When Aileen asked, Mykil explained why floating wasn't feasible. They would use up resources that couldn't be easily replenished until they reached civilization, and they needed to be in fighting shape when the rogue appeared.

The further they went into the cave, the stronger the foul hum became. Aileen wasn't looking forward to meeting up with the rogue, but no way was she going to be left out of helping Bardell. If she planned to live this life, she would have to learn not only the good aspects but the bad as well. However, she hoped this would be the last time she had to go into a hideously gross cave. This was one place she never planned on writing about. Well, maybe. It would be a great troll home. If the little children wandered into the cave looking for riches ... Hmm, a moral story concerning avarice.

The group stayed quiet as they traversed the passageways. Deeper and deeper they went into the cave. Aileen thought about the movie *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and wondered if they might find dinosaurs at the end of their own journey. After what felt like several miles, they heard loud, rushing water.

Alexi halted the group. "If I have to guess, I would say that our rogue's lair is somewhere near the water. I wish I knew who it is so I would know how to proceed. Going in blind is not my favorite way to conduct business."

Johann looked at the group and offered a strategy. "Since we're sure he isn't in there, we need to watch out for traps, and if he comes back, we're going to have our hands full. Mykil, while Alexi and I watch for the rogue and any traps, you and Aileen get Bardell out of here. If he comes back and you notice that we're seemingly in over our heads, you can assist us while Aileen leads Bardell out. I have a bad feeling that he's going to come back, and then the shit'll hit the fan."

Alexi took mild umbrage at his friend's mention of needing assistance by rolling his eyes, but kept quiet. Mykil nodded his head in agreement and looked at Aileen. "Could you find your way out alone if you had to?"

"I just follow Alexi's untainted blood. Not to say that your blood is tainted, Johann." Aileen smiled and winked at Johann.

He smiled back and walked into the next offshoot. "Damn!" He jumped back and looked at them. "Alexi, come here and look."

Alexi joined him at the opening and peered at what Johann had seen. He jerked back as well. "We have good news and bad news."

"Let's have it." Mykil seemed to brace himself for the worst.

"Well, the good news is that we've located Bardell." Alexi informed the group.

“And the bad news?” Aileen asked.

“The bad news is that he’s strapped down and unconscious. That will make it harder to get him out of here. Hopefully he isn’t too badly injured.” Alexi turned to look back toward the opening and sighed. “The nearest hospital is miles away.”

“Let’s get it done. We haven’t fed, and I need to feed Aileen soon.” Mykil wrapped Aileen in a thick barrier and ignored her disgruntled expression. “Aileen, you can’t approach Bardell unless I dissolve the barrier, or I extend it to encompass him as well. You need to remember this so that you don’t inadvertently harm him by getting too close.”

She nodded, not liking that the barrier was necessary.

The men looked at one another and stepped into the offshoot. When Aileen followed, she noticed that it wasn’t just another passage. They had entered a large cavern. Off to one side, a large pool of water with a waterfall emptying into it seemed to be the source of the odor that made her eyes water. The walls looked like they were a hundred feet high, and thousands of stalactites hung from the ceiling. Reciprocating stalagmites covered the floor. Aileen had the fanciful notion that she’d stepped into the mouth of a monstrous dragon.

Across the room, Bardell lay on a large, flat slab that looked to be made of some sort of strange metal. Metallic cuffs encased his wrists and ankles. Long chains attached to the cuffs were staked into the surface of the table.

Aileen gasped and would have run to his aid immediately, but Mykil stepped in front of her. “Think, love. The rogue hasn’t harmed him. I can detect his heartbeat, and it’s strong and steady. Bardell has been staked for another reason.”

“And we’re it, right?” Aileen could feel herself growing more and more angry as she thought about what the rogue had put her new family through. Yes, they’re my new family, Damn it! And this asshole has no right to disrupt the sanctity of my family.

The new vampire emotions warred with her natural equanimity, and she really wanted to hurt this guy.

Mykil shook his head. “While I’m happy that you consider us your new family, I’m worried that you’ll go off half-cocked on the rogue, and I can’t allow that.

Compared to a rogue vampire, you are a newborn infant. And you can only do as much damage as an infant could. Meaning none. The rogue, however, could kill you with a single well-placed slap. Do I have your word that you won't go near him?"

When she grudgingly gave her promise, he leaned down and gave her a quick kiss. He then signaled the other men.

"While my priority is to remove Aileen and Bardell, I'm going to have my hands full controlling my mate from any retaliatory temptations she may have."

Aileen took a lazy swing at him. "I won't get in the way. I promised."

Nodding their understanding of Mykil's fears, Alexi and Johann kept watch for the rogue. Mykil guided Aileen to where Bardell lay. They could find no obvious marks on Bardell to signify abuse, not even a bump on the head to explain the reason he was unconscious.

Aileen stood over Bardell calling his name. "Mykil, get rid of this barrier so I can wake him up."

"No."

"Augghh! Then you do something. Open those cuff things, and let's get him out of here."

Mykil grasped the cuff on one of Bardell's ankles and immediately jerked his hands back, hissing. "Impossible." Mykil stared aghast down at all the metal surrounding Bardell. "This metal is palladodymite. Where in the hell did he find so much of it?"

"What do you mean?" Aileen looked at the metal, not seeing anything unusual about it.

"Alexi, Johann, this is palladodymite." Tossing this information over his shoulder, he looked back at Aileen; she could feel the relief in him. He was glad that he had encased her in a barrier before they had approached the metal. "Palladodymite is poison to vampires, Aileen. It has arsenic in it. Quite a bit, actually, and pure palladodymite is lethal to us. If it had been any one of us chained down here, we would be dead by now. For some reason, the palladium and rhodium that make up the other two compounds of this metal act as an amplifier, pushing the arsenic into our blood. The Society's scientists have

pondered this phenomenon for centuries, ever since the metal came to our attention. I have never seen it in such quantities. This is pure and only found in South Urals, Russia. Whoever mined and made this contraption must have spent a long time doing it and had to have been very careful, as well. Unbelievable.” He continued to stare at the piece of metal as if entranced for a moment longer, then shook himself.

“I’m going to need some help with this.” Mykil stopped Aileen’s offer before she gave it. “You are to stand aside, Aileen, and keep an eye out for any changes. Trust your feelings and let us know when you sense anything strange.”

Not happy with her assigned task, but willing to do her best, she turned away from the men, who removed their jackets and wrapped them around their hands for protection. They all tugged on the chains. The looks on their faces showed that just touching the metal was extremely painful. Aileen opened her senses and expanded them to encompass the whole cave. After eliminating the hums of the three male vampires and the blood scent of Bardell, she could sense wisps of the evil vibration.

She wasn’t sure what to look for since she didn’t think that a rogue would just bound into the cavern and say, Here I am, come get me, so she just left her senses open.

The men strained to free Bardell. Each had taken a chain, and when that didn’t work, they all pulled on one chain. Even with their preternatural strength, it almost didn’t come loose. With a loud crack, the chain finally broke free. Quickly, they did the same to the other three chains. As they were pulling the last one free, Aileen felt it.

“I think you guys need to pay attention now. I’m getting a nasty feeling.” Aileen looked around, not seeing anything different than before, but she could feel it. The same foul hum that had been in her living room now crept up on her and invaded her senses, only infinitely worse than before.

Bardell, still unconscious, was placed on the ground under the slab for his protection. There wasn’t time to get out of the cavern before the rogue would appear. Alexi and Johann stood in front of Aileen with their backs to her and took a step back. Not wanting the men to step into her barrier and hurt themselves, Aileen took a step back as well. The two vampires took another step back.

Aileen glared at their backs. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Alexi didn’t take his eyes off the entrance to the cave. “Herding you back toward the table. We’re keeping you safe by staying between you and the rogue.”

Aileen could feel her back teeth grinding. Mykil intercepted her before she went after Alexi. “Dear heart, I need you and your barrier under the slab with Bardell. While we take care of the rogue, you take care of Bardell. I’ll extend the barrier to encompass him, as well; try to get him awake and coherent. Please, I need you to do this for me.”

Aileen suddenly realized what the men had planned. There was going to be a fight, and she didn’t think that the rogue would get out of this cave alive. Not with the odds stacked against him three to one. “Okay, I’ll stay with Bardell, but you’re going to have to turn off the barrier while I climb under there.” It wasn’t what she wanted to do -- she really just wanted to go back to Mykil’s house -- but it looked like she had no choice in the matter.

Mykil waited until she was on her hands and knees, ready to crawl under the metal contraption before he dissolved the barrier. He immediately reformed it so that it surrounded her and Bardell. Mykil watched as she got comfortable and placed Bardell’s head on her lap so she could monitor his health. “Be careful that you don’t touch those chains or cuffs. It’s extremely painful for an older vampire; it would be excruciating to you. Stay safe.” After delivering his warning and his plea, he turned and joined his two friends.

The hum grew stronger and stronger. Aileen could feel the rogue coming closer. She wanted to run far away from whatever or whoever approached. Running her hand through Bardell’s hair soothingly, Aileen stared in the direction that the vile disturbance was coming from. Her nerves jumped, her skin crawled, and the hand that wasn’t petting Bardell’s hair clenched so tightly she broke a nail. It distracted her for a moment because it hurt ... a lot.

Aileen looked up from her excruciatingly painful wound and heard a hissing noise coming from the entrance into the cavern. He stood in the portal, strangely dignified. Long, greasy, unkempt red hair hung down his back. His clothes were dirty and torn and looked as if they were from another time. Cape, knee-length pants, buckle shoes, a tight, short jacket, and a dingy shirt and cravat.

His face was the scariest thing Aileen had ever seen. His eyes glowed, not the familiar red that Aileen had seen on Mykil, but an eerie neon yellow. It was agonizing to look at his face. He looked to be in extreme pain. Deep grooves lined his features, and his mouth had turned down in a perpetual snarl. Fangs dripped with saliva that he wouldn't or couldn't control, and nails, fully extended from arthritic hands, completed the picture.

Aileen turned her head from the sight of him and looked down at Bardell. He started to stir. "Bardell, wake up. Please." Bardell moaned and turned his head on her lap, but didn't open his eyes.

Hearing a hissing noise, she looked back at the rogue. Keeping to the wall, he moved around the cavern. When the rogue spoke, his voice sounded raspy, like nails on a chalkboard.

"Ahh, company. Illustrious company, at that. The Guardian, the head Enforcer, and the Midas, all in my lair. I'm honored. What brings you here?" He glanced past the men and noticed that the slab no longer had an occupant. Taking an aggressive step forward, he glared at the men, who created a solid wall of muscle between him and the metal device. "How did you get him free? I need him to stay harnessed to the table." The rogue looked around the cavern frantically until he noticed Bardell. "Yes, there he is." He took a step toward Bardell, but stopped when he noticed that the men weren't moving out of his way.

"You are going to have to step aside if I am to proceed," he stated reasonably.

Alexi, as the ranking vampire, took control. "What is your name, rogue?"

The rogue shot Alexi a startled glance. "I am not a rogue. How dare you call me such?" He drew himself up straight, but in his deteriorated, curled-spine condition, it looked like it hurt.

Ignoring the denial, Alexi spoke in a voice that echoed throughout the cavern. "Rogue, your condition speaks for itself. I have come to judge you. If you have committed crimes against the Society, you will be charged, and your sentence will be carried out immediately. Do you understand the precepts of this trial?"

"Trial? You are going to try me? Well, go ahead!" Spittle flew out of his mouth with his angry words.

Continuing in his official voice, Alexi began to ask the rogue questions. “What is your birth name?”

The rogue looked to the left and to the right. “My name is Owen McNeely.” His eyes glazed over, and his lips twisted into a facsimile of a smile. “It was so very long ago, but my mother called me ‘lambkins.’ She was a saint, you know.”

“What is the contraption behind us?” Alexi didn’t turn and look toward her and Bardell, just continued to watch the rogue.

Perking noticeably, the rogue smiled. “Like it, do you? It is my own design. I have been testing the palladodymite on humans to see if it will affect them the same way as it does us. I am hoping that the arsenic will infiltrate the human blood and that we can safely ingest it, creating a vaccine, which will facilitate building immunity in vampires. I’ve had humans mining the metal for decades so that I could have enough to make my table. Isn’t it wonderful? Confidentially, I am glad to be out of Russia. Winters are excruciating there, unlike California. He told me that California would be a good place to set up my table and run my experiments. He was right.”

Alexi prompted him with his next question. “The table, how have you used it?”

“It is simple; I cuff a human to the table and wait to see how much of the arsenic is transferred into their blood before they die from it. Okay, it is a little more difficult than that. I have to take blood samples regularly and monitor their condition at all times. Take the man that I had on the table. I took him from another vampire.” Evil laughter came from his misshapen mouth. “The vampire probably has no idea that his kept prey is missing. I had another human snatch him, and since the vampire recently took a mate, he will be busy for awhile. I’m not sure who the vampire is, but he wanted me to target that particular vampire’s house, but it’s still pleasurable knowing I have taken something of his without his knowledge.” He chuckled, creating ripples of fear and disgust that ran down Aileen’s back.

As he carried on about how he had outsmarted the local vampire, he never noticed the growing anger on Mykil’s face.

“Owen McNeely, do you have a mate, and if so, where is she?” Alexi questioned before Mykil took matters into his own hands.

Owen's head and shoulders drooped, and he sighed deeply. "A hunter killed my Desiree." He looked up at Alexi. "Do you have a mate?" When Alexi shook his head in the negative, the rogue dropped his head once again and stared at the floor. "Then you couldn't possibly understand. She was my life. No, she was my everything, and someone killed her."

"How did the hunter get to her?" Alexi asked in a hard voice. "How was it possible for a hunter to kill your mate and yet you still live?"

Snarling and hissing, the rogue advanced on Alexi. "I wasn't there when he came. He waited until I had left to feed; then he slithered in and killed her."

Alexi stood his ground. "And how did he get past your defenses?"

Mykil and Johann shifted away from Alexi to give him room to maneuver. The rogue was becoming agitated and would probably attack, and the others didn't want to hinder Alexi's range of movement.

The vampire growled when he shouted at Alexi, "I had not realized that I needed the defenses! No human had ever been able to find our lair before, and I didn't expect that a lone hunter could. I was told that nothing would happen to her. He promised."

Alexi looked at him and asked another question. "Have you deliberately killed your prey while feeding?"

McNeely screamed his answer. "Yes! I have killed while feeding, and the first one I killed was the son-of-a-bitch who killed my Desiree. It felt good, so every time I have fed since then, I have killed my prey."

"Have you killed vampires?" Alexi asked.

"Naturally. I had to to test my theories," he replied.

"Last question, rogue: why did you not follow your mate in death and save me the trouble of killing you?" Alexi's face was as hard as marble, and his ice-crystal-blue eyes flashed.

The rogue leapt at Alexi. His eyes glowed a feral yellow, and his nails and teeth had extended to the fullest.

Aileen wasn't exactly sure why Alexi had battered the man about his mate's death, but she had lost all sympathy for him when he had casually dismissed the deaths he'd caused. Bardell moaned and turned his head. When Aileen looked at him, he opened his eyes.

"Oh, damn. My head hurts. Did you get the license plate of the truck that hit me?" Bardell moaned.

Aileen blinked and smiled. "Welcome back. Mykil will be glad that you're awake." She looked up to see what the men were doing. Alexi had dodged the rogue's initial attack and had retaliated with a punch to the face.

"What's going on?" Bardell rubbed his head, and when the shackles clanked, he looked at them curiously. "What the hell is this?" He lifted his arm toward Aileen.

The chain touched her arm, and she jerked away from it. "Ow, that hurt!" Just the slight touch of the metal had burned her skin. A small mark started to blister on her arm. Aileen looked at the spot in shock. When Mykil had said to avoid touching the chain and cuffs, he hadn't said anything about it frying her. It stung like heck, too.

Bardell looked at Aileen's arm as well. "What happened to your arm?" He reached for her, but pulled back when she flinched away from his hand. "What is it, Aileen? My head hurts so badly that I'm having trouble thinking. Could you please tell me what's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Bardell, but if you wouldn't let those chains touch me, I would be much happier." Aileen smiled at Bardell when he immediately pulled his arms, and consequently the chains, as far as possible away from her.

Bardell started to sit up. "I don't know where Mykil is, but would prefer not getting caught in the lap of a jealous vampire's mate." He moaned and put his hand to his head, jerking the chains away when she couldn't contain a flinch. "What has you afraid of the chains?"

They turned their heads toward a scuffling noise, and Aileen grinned when Bardell gasped in astonishment at the silent fight going on not thirty feet from where they sat. Alexi had just thrown the red-headed vampire against a stalagmite. The man grunted and returned to the fray. Mykil stood between the fight and their position, and Johann blocked the passageway.

While Bardell watched the fight, Aileen explained the events that had transpired since they had been together in the kitchen.

“I remember the blond man with the broken nose. He was lying on the side of the road. After that, I’m blank. I have no recollection of anything else until waking up on your lap with this splitting headache.”

After bringing Bardell up to speed, Aileen turned back to watch the fight. Talk about stamina. These guys look like they can go on forever.

Alexi got in close to the rogue and, almost too rapidly to see, placed punches in Owen’s face and stomach. Owen staggered back, caught his balance before he fell, and stepped forward.

Owen retaliated with quick jabs to Alexi’s torso, stepped back out of Alexi’s reach, and attempted a roundhouse kick. Missing, he followed through with a backhand punch that staggered Alexi.

Back and forth, they traded punches. Both bled profusely, and Alexi had three deep scratches along his chest that the rogue had caught him with early in the fight. Alexi threw a punch at the fiend and stumbled, but managed to stay on his feet.

Owen emitted a high-pitched, hysterical laugh. “Finally! I have you now, Enforcer. Now you will die! I will go free to continue my experiments. The others can’t touch me. I know the law. Only an Enforcer can punish me.” He continued to laugh as he circled Alexi, staying just out of reach.

“What ...?” Alexi didn’t seem to have enough strength to ask his question. He shook his head as if trying to clear it.

“What is wrong with you? Is that what you want to ask? Please, I want you to know. I have palladodymite under my nails.” He laughed maniacally. “I have been studying the metal for such a long time that I have built up a bit of immunity to it, but only under my nails. Strange, that, but I just haven’t had time to do a thorough study.” He tsked sadly. “No worries, I will just have to make the time.”

He looked back at Alexi and smiled again. “When I scratched you, it was with the express purpose of placing minute particles of the metal under your skin. This method is rather effective. I have tested it out many times with satisfactory results. All the vampires have died within a short time of ... I guess you could

call it infection. Isn't it wonderful?" Owen waited for the other vampires to recognize his genius and praise him. When the praise didn't come, he looked at first astonished that they wouldn't afford him the expected accolades; then he got angry.

"I suppose it is too much to expect you muscle-bound imbeciles to understand the importance of my discoveries. I have found our own equivalent of the nuclear weapon. Just as the Germans figured out the uses of plutonium, I have studied palladodymite." When the vampires watching him still didn't react, he screamed in frustration and attacked Alexi, intending to finish him off.

Alexi waited until Aileen thought he was doomed, then stepped to one side. Extending one arm, he caught the rogue in the neck and ripped out a majority of his throat. Owen turned slowly, choking.

He fell to the floor, clutching his throat. Nearby, Alexi also collapsed.

Alexi took a deep breath and pronounced sentence on the insane rogue. "Guilty." He breathed in with difficulty. "You are guilty not only of the murder of your prey, but of an unknown number of vampires." You must do this, Mykil. Aileen heard Alexi in her head. Johann is unable, as he is recording the trial. You are one of my deputies. Finish this.

Mykil nodded his head and walked over to the rogue, who was attempting to crawl away on all fours and trying to get air into his starving lungs. Mykil put his hands on either side of the fiend's head. "Owen McNeely, you have been found guilty by an Enforcer of the Society and have been sentenced to death. May the gods have mercy on your soul. The human you took is my man. No one dares to take from me." Finally, there was fear in Owen's eyes.

Aileen gasped as Mykil tightened his grip on the man's head, twisted it sharply to the side, and broke his spinal cord. A sickening crunch sounded as he completed the task by placing his foot on the rogue's back, then ripping the head off of the twitching body.

Smoke started curling up from the headless vampire's chest. In seconds, a flame ignited in the center of the torso, soon engulfing the dead man and turning him to ash.

Mykil tossed the severed head to the side and watched as it, too, burst into flames and turned to ash.

Turning toward Alexi, Aileen noticed that Johann had already reached their wounded friend. Alexi's breathing was shallow, and he struggled with every breath he managed to take. He looked bad. The wounds on his chest had begun to close due to his enhanced healing ability, but the scratches festered.

Aileen knew that Alexi was hurt, but couldn't do anything from under the palladodymite table. "Mykil, the barrier." The moment it dissolved, she crawled out from under the table, stood, and approached Alexi.

"Oh, damn," she said quietly. In the moments that had elapsed since he had fallen, his wound had putrefied. "What can we do to help him?"

Johann softly said, "There is no cure for palladodymite. None that we know of, anyway." He stood and crossed the cavern.

Mykil and Aileen heard a loud bang, which caused Aileen to jump. More banging followed, but when Aileen started to go in that direction, Mykil stopped her. "It's Johann. He's taking his frustration out on the wall of the cavern."

"What can we do? There has to be something we can do to help him, Mykil. The rogue survived this stuff for who knows how long. How is that possible it burned me when it just barely touched me?" Aileen showed Mykil the wound on her arm.

Mykil grabbed her arm, and when he saw the blister on her arm, he began to curse. He looked around and spied the sulfur pool, then headed in that direction. Since he still had a grip on Aileen's arm, she had no choice but to accompany him.

Kneeling at the edge of the pool and dragging Aileen down with him, Mykil plunged her arm into the warm, smelly water.

"Mykil, what are you doing?" she hollered. "It stings!" When she tried to pull her arm out of the water, Mykil wrapped his free arm around her waist to hold her in place.

"The arsenic in the metal is attempting to enter your system. Hopefully the water will slow it down. It's all I can think of." Mykil looked so scared. His thoughts filtered to her. No vampire known has survived a direct burn from palladodymite. I'm going to lose Alexi; I can't lose Aileen, as well. I won't

lose her. Please ... He held her around the waist, not allowing her to pull her arm out of the water no matter how hard she struggled.

She had to block his thoughts out. She couldn't concentrate on soothing his fears when her arm hurt so badly. The water was stinging like a sonofabitch, and all her concentration went there. Long minutes later, the ache started to lessen. It petered off until it didn't hurt at all.

"Mykil, you can let go now. It doesn't hurt anymore." She sighed as he continued to hold her arm under the water. "Honestly, you can let go now."

Tugging until he released the pressure on her arm enough to lift it up, Aileen looked at her wound. "Where did it go?"

They both looked at the place that had been burned. No sign of it remained, and no proof that it had ever been there.

Jumping up and yelling for Johann, Mykil abandoned Aileen at the side of the pool and ran toward Alexi.

Bardell sat by Alexi, and they were speaking quietly. When Mykil approached, they looked up at him. Johann wasn't far behind.

"Help me get him into the pool." Mykil started pulling off Alexi's shirt.

The other two men just stared at him. Alexi touched Mykil's hand. "It is all right, my friend. I know that there is nothing to be done for me. At least when I go, I won't be alone. I will have my family with me." He stopped for a second to take a breath. "Now, would you stop taking off my clothes?" The last he huffed in such an exasperated tone that Aileen smiled softly.

Mykil continued to pull off Alexi's clothes, paying no mind to his friend's wishes. "Would you please help me? We have to get him into the pool immediately."

When Alexi was naked, Mykil grasped one of his arms and pulled him into a standing position. Wrapping his arm around Alexi's waist, he began to propel Alexi toward the pool.

"Help me, damn it." Mykil tried to explain again. "Aileen's arm is healed."

Johann and Alexi looked at him as if he'd lost his mind, but Bardell gasped.

“The burn from the chain is healed? How?” Bardell reached out to help Mykil with Alexi, but jerked away when the chains jangled.

“What are you talking about?” Johann assisted in getting Alexi to the pool. “I don’t know what the hell is going on, but if you think it has a chance in a million ... I’ll try anything.”

Carefully the men slid Alexi into the pool, holding on to his body under his arms so he couldn’t float away. Alexi bellowed loud enough to loosen a few stalactites. They came crashing to the floor with enough force to make holes where they landed. Shards of debris flew everywhere, including on the crowd by the pool, narrowly missing Aileen. She jumped out of the way just in time, then scooted close to a wall.

Everyone else ignored the fallout because their attention was riveted to the happenings in the sulfur pool. Around Alexi’s wounded chest, the water began to boil. Mykil started to drag Alexi out of the water, but paused when Aileen heard Alexi shout.

“Noo!”

Chapter Eleven

The water continued to boil and bubble around Alexi's wound while he screamed and writhed in pain. Mykil reached in to pull him out, even if it went against his friend's wishes.

"Mykil, look!" Johann stared at Alexi's wounds. The bubbling had slowed, and Alexi's cries had quieted to moans. "Wait until the bubbling stops; then we'll pull him out."

Mykil nodded his agreement, and the three men waited none too patiently for the water to calm. The very second that the water stopped boiling, they unceremoniously yanked Alexi out of the sulfur pool.

They gasped and stared wide-eyed. The horrible tears and gashes that Owen McNeely had left on Alexi's chest looked clean, no longer festered, and had begun to heal. Never before had vampires contaminated with palladodymite survived. It looked to Mykil as if Alexi would come out of this attack without even a decent scar to mark the occasion.

Bardell retrieved Alexi's clothes and used the vampire's jacket to conceal his nude lower half. Mykil looked at him strangely, and when Bardell tilted his head in Aileen's direction, Mykil's eyes widened, then narrowed. It seemed while everyone else had forgotten Aileen's presence, Bardell had not.

Mykil stood and strode over to where Aileen sat propped up on one of the stalagmites, watching the happenings avidly.

"What are you doing, Aileen?" Mykil asked quietly as he approached her.

Tilting her head to the side so she could see around Mykil, she grinned naughtily. "Checking out Alexi's bod."

"Excuse me?"

"He has a really nice upper torso, you know? It isn't as broad as yours, but in its own compact way, it's nice." Aileen looked up into Mykil's stern face and glowing eyes and laughed. "You should see your face. It's getting as red as your eyes. I'm just teasing you. I quit looking as soon as you started stripping him, and if you come down here, you can see that my visibility is severely limited." She smiled impishly at him and patted the ground beside her in an invitation for him to join her. "He's going to be okay, isn't he?"

“Alexi will be fine. I don’t understand it; palladodymite has been a problem for our people for millennia. We searched and tested, but have never found a cure for the metal poisoning. Alexi, though, has almost completely healed in only moments.” Mykil shook his head. Looking over where Alexi lay, he noticed that Bardell assisted him in getting dressed. They would be leaving soon.

Aileen stood and wandered over to the table. “What are we going to do with this thing? We can’t leave it here. The other vampire might get it and use it.”

Mykil looked at her strangely. “What other vampire?”

“The one Owen kept talking about.” She turned toward Mykil and shrugged her shoulders. “You know, he kept saying, HE said this and HE said that. I figure that there’s someone else in the picture. Don’t you think?”

Mykil stared at her for a moment, then abruptly left her. He glanced back when he heard her thoughts. There he goes again. He gets a thought, and BAM, he’s gone. He smiled when she sighed and turned back to the table.

He joined his friends by the pool. Alexi was dressed and sitting up on his own. Johann and Bardell had been talking, but turned when Mykil approached.

“We need to find out who McNeely’s master is.”

Alexi turned to him questioningly. “What master?”

“Aileen pointed out that McNeely kept repeating He. The rogue wouldn’t have used that unless he had someone else pulling the strings. Remember, he said things like, He said that she would be safe and He said California would be a good place. Apparently McNeely wasn’t working on his own.”

Johann shook his head and cursed. “You’re right. We’re going to have to inform the Leader about everything that happened here, and soon. He’ll also have to take control of the table.”

Alexi nodded. “He’ll want to have some of our scientists study the effect of the sulfur water on the palladodymite, as well. We’ll have to contact him soon. Archimedes will be ecstatic. She’ll be all over this like red on a tomato.”

Mykil assisted Alexi to his feet, laughing when he pictured the flamboyant scientist. “We should feed, then come back here and wait for Moonshadow.

He'll want to talk to us personally, but with Johann here, there's really no need."

The men all laughed. Hearing it, Aileen turned and smiled, asked them what was so funny.

"Johann has a photographic memory. He works for the leader of the Society as the Guardian and as the official record keeper. That is why I had to make the kill and not him. Johann mentally recorded the event because Alexi had been injured, and I -- as one of his deputies -- was the only one left to make the kill. Johann memorized it for me so I won't have to face an inquiry at the Gathering."

"What do you mean by inquiry? Will you have to face a judge?" Aileen joined the men near the pool and stood looking up at Mykil.

"Normally I would have to go in front of the Leader during the next Gathering and justify the kill. But with Johann here doing his thing, I just have to put my signature at the bottom of the written account that will be drawn up." He put his arm around her and turned her toward the other men. "What do you say we go grab a bite to eat?"

Aileen elbowed Mykil in the stomach while the others laughed.

"I could go for a giant, juicy cheeseburger myself," Bardell piped in.

They had been headed out of the cave, but his comment caused everyone to stop and look at him.

"Well, I could. You don't know what you're missing," he said defensively.

That brought on another round of laughter, and the five of them left the cave.

They headed toward the edge of the mountain range to the nearest town. Mykil carried Bardell, but had to stay wary of the cuffs and chains that still adorned the human. It would be easier to remove the offending contraptions at home, with the proper tools, so they hadn't attempted it in the cave.

Bardell had wrapped the chains attached to his wrists around his waist and run the chains locked on his ankles up his pant legs. He put on Mykil's jacket as an added precaution to keep them from touching any of the vampires, but the fear of being burned remained.

The little town at the foot of the mountain was jumping. It was nearing three in the morning, and still, loud noises and laughter came from the center of town.

Landing inconspicuously in a dark alley, the group headed for the main street to find some nourishment. They found a small Italian restaurant a few doors down from the alley, and since Bardell said that pasta sounded better than a cheeseburger, they entered and found a table in a dark corner.

The waitress who came to their table looked run ragged. Bardell smiled at her and ordered for himself. The others only ordered drinks.

“What’s going on tonight that has everyone in the street?” Bardell asked the waitress.

“The high school just won the state championship in football this evening. It’s a big deal around here, and unfortunately for me, it means that the townspeople will be out celebrating until dawn.” She sighed tiredly. “My boss decided that if the town was going to be up anyway, why should the bars get all the money, so we stayed open as well.”

The group commiserated with her, and she left to place their order.

While the men spoke quietly, Aileen practiced her hearing control. As soon as she had stepped out of the alley with her hand in Mykil’s, noises had bombarded her to the point of pain. She had diligently ignored it, but now that she had a moderately quiet place in the restaurant to think, she wondered if she could control what and how far she could hear.

First she tried to tune out all noises except the conversations at her table. After a few failed attempts, she managed to listen to just her companions. Accomplishing that, she tuned them out and picked out a table halfway across the dining area. The two women at that table kept sending surreptitious looks at her own table, then whispering. Curious, she homed in on their whispered conversation, and hearing what they said made her turn her head away from them.

Mykil put his arm on the back of Aileen’s chair, and turned his attention to her. “What’s so humorous, dear heart?”

Aileen looked up at him and laughed. “See the two women at the table behind me?” Mykil nodded. “They’re all aflutter because of the -- and I quote -- ‘orgasms just waiting to happen’ that are sitting at our table. Apparently, they

like the looks of your friends.” She started to shake her head, but heard one of the women wonder aloud about how hard it would be to get the steamy babe with the long black hair to ditch the bitch. Aileen turned to glare at the two women.

Mykil quickly placed a hand on her chin and turned her to face him for a kiss. “Calm down, love; your eyes are glowing, and your teeth are likely to erupt,” he whispered against her lips. “Although I do appreciate your willingness to protect my virtue.” Smiling against her mouth, he deepened the kiss.

Completely distracted, Aileen threw herself into the kiss until she heard someone clearing his throat. Aileen tipped her head back, breaking off the kiss, and turned toward the others at the table. “Hmm?” She hummed the question. Noticing the grins on the men at the table, she coughed and straightened up in her chair.

Mykil pulled a lock of her hair, told her not to be so nosey and that he would help her practice her hearing control at home. Leaning her head on his shoulder, she decided he had a point. She still had very little control over her enhanced senses or her emotions.

“What is it with vampire blood?” she softly asked Mykil. “One taste, and I’m ready to bite some ho’s head off for coveting what is obviously my property. And now that I think about it, what is with these uncontrollable feelings of ownership I’ve had for you ever since Baker Boy?”

“You feel that you own me? Really?” Mykil laughed and hugged her tight to his side. “That’s great. I find that I have those same feelings, and I’m having a difficult time not biting off a few heads of my own when I notice males looking at you. I’ve come to the conclusion that it is a symptom of the mating ritual. Our instincts require us to become comfortable with one another and deepen the relationship so that we never wish to separate from our mate, and I suppose these feelings are to assist us in our goal. Although, I do sometimes feel like a dog with a big bone that I don’t wish to share.”

Aileen elbowed Mykil in the side and huffed. “Big bone, indeed.” Surreptitiously, she slid her hand up his leg and cupped his growing erection. “I’ll show you big bone.”

He arched his hips into her hand for just a moment, then relaxed and removed her hand. “Be patient. Unless you don’t mind being fucked on the table. This is the second time this has come up. Do you have a public-sex fetish?”

She considered it for a moment, but the restaurant was a family one, so she decided against it. “A fetish, but not a public-sex one. Save that for me -- we’ll use it later for sure.”

The group laughed and talked as Bardell finished his meal. Eventually, he pushed back from the table, proclaiming himself stuffed, so they paid the bill and left a generous tip for their waitress.

Leaving the restaurant, they split up. Alexi and Johann went their own way, while Mykil took Aileen and Bardell with him. It was difficult to find a quiet spot to feed. Finally, with Bardell standing casually at the entrance to a darkened alley, Mykil called a couple to them. Aileen and Mykil fed quickly and sent the humans on their way.

Aileen and Bardell talked quietly, getting to know each other better while they waited for Johann and Alexi to join them, and were laughing and joking like old friends when the males finally arrived.

“If you two are done socializing, we have to get back to the caves. I called Jonsie and told her where to pick you up, Bardell. We’re going to leave you at the hotel while we go deal with Moonshadow.” Mykil paced in front of his mate and friends like a general giving orders to his troops. “I would prefer that Aileen go home with Bardell, but it will be light soon, and I won’t take the chance of her not getting to a safe place before then.”

“Umm, Mykil?” Aileen sat on a bench, watching Mykil pace. “What’s up? I can feel your agitation, but I don’t know what’s causing it.”

Mykil went over to Aileen and placed his hand on her face, gently cupping her cheek. “I’m sorry, dear heart. I’m uncomfortable having the Leader around you.”

“Why? Is he dangerous?”

Johann and Alexi nodded, and Mykil explained, “The Leader of the Society is not elected into office like the human government. If a vampire wants the position, he has to fight for it. If he wins that bout, he then has to fight any challengers.”

“Eight years ago, at the last Gathering, a vampire named Shiye Moonshadow offered the leader a challenge. Moonshadow won that match, and fifteen others challenged him. He won those matches, as well. Now Moonshadow is the

Leader. While he has shown himself to be a good Leader, no male wishes for him to be around his mate.” Mykil sat on the bench next to Aileen.

“Will he hurt a female?” Aileen asked.

“He is unmated, and while he hasn’t shown any violent tendencies toward women, he is a different, and potentially dangerous, man.”

Johann stepped closer and told the group what he knew of Moonshadow. “In my job, I have to work closely with him. He’s a quiet man. I think it has to do with his Anasazi background. His mother was Anasazi, and his father decided to raise Shiye in the tribe. He spent his first few centuries living with his mother’s people. Then, when the Anasazi disappeared, he lived on his own. He has never spoken about where they went, but I’m sure he knows.”

Alexi nodded and took up the story for Aileen. “We know he is capable of incredible feats of strength, just by his winning the sixteen bouts he had in one day. We don’t think he is dangerous to females, but until we know him better ... He has one close friend that we know of, a mated male who is an affable creature. Johann and I socialize with Stephen and his mate frequently. I don’t remember seeing Angela spending time with Shiye, but who knows? It’s natural for a vampire to want to protect his mate and children. If there were a crowd of vampires and Shiye Moonshadow arrived in the area, there would be a different-colored shield around every female and child in the vicinity.”

“Why different-colored shields?” she wondered aloud. This insight into vampire behavior was fascinating.

Mykil explained, “Each male generates a different-colored shield. Compare it to the human fingerprint. Each is slightly different and unique. As you have seen, the shield I generate is green. Alexi’s is gold, and Johann’s is silver. The Gathering is interesting. Every color under the rainbow is represented.”

Aileen laughed. “Alexi has the golden shield. Funny. I would think Midas would get the gold barrier. And what color is the shield of the leader?” Aileen asked.

Mykil looked at Alexi and Johann. Both shrugged. Mykil’s eyebrows rose and he turned to Aileen. “Now that you mention it, I don’t know. I don’t think he has ever raised one in anyone’s presence. As for Alexi’s shield, you aren’t the first to point that out, but we are born with our shields. It has nothing to do with our positions.”

Alexi stood, officially ending the conversation. “We have to get moving, or we’ll see the sun. Personally, I’m not ready to end my life yet.”

Bardell laughed and said goodbye to the vampires, then headed across the park toward the hotel. The others surreptitiously took to the air. Aileen hadn’t learned how to cloak herself as she flew, so the men assisted her in hiding herself from anyone who might be looking into the sky.

Following their own trail back, they returned to the cave and sent a call to Shiye Moonshadow. The mental reply they received stated simply, One hour. Apparently, he was a man of few words. Aileen smiled and shook her head.

The hour passed quickly, and Aileen was comfortably leaning up against a stalagmite with her eyes closed when she felt a disturbance in the air. Opening her eyes, she saw green. Mykil had already placed a protective shield around her. Guessing correctly that the leader had caused the disturbance, she stood and approached her mate. The stories the men had told her about the approaching vampire worried her, and she unconsciously sought out Mykil for support. Mykil stared toward the cave entrance that led into the large cavern they occupied. He grasped her hand and placed her behind him protectively.

The man who appeared surprised her. He looked nothing like she had pictured him. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and muscular, of Native American descent, like her, and wore his black hair long. A brown-and-white feather had been woven into a lock of his hair. He was beautiful, as a lion or tiger seemed beautiful, and he oozed power in much the same way the large cats did.

Aileen noticed all these features right before Mykil pulled her fully behind him and blocked her view. He wouldn’t even let her peek around him. He kept a firm grip on her wrist and, without exerting pressure, held her behind him.

She could only manage to listen to the men as they discussed their business. Johann spoke first.

“I’m glad that you could come so quickly, Leader. We have a situation. The destruction of a rogue was carried out here, but we don’t think he worked alone. There’s a table made of palladodymite equipped with chains and cuffs in this cave. But an important discovery has occurred.”

Aileen couldn’t see what happened, but when Johann continued, she figured he must have received a nonverbal response.

“The Enforcer was infected with palladodymite during the fight. I’ll be making a full report, but in the ensuing minutes after the destruction of the rogue, it was noted that the sulfur pool eliminated all signs of the metal poisoning from Mykil’s mate. We placed the Enforcer into the pool, and as you see, he is healing. It’s not known if he is cured, because we are not scientists, nor are we healers.”

She heard Alexi clear his throat and begin speaking. “Although weak, I feel as I did before the fight. Not as I did when the poison was in effect. It’s my plan to visit the nearest healer as soon as this business is taken care of. Considering the importance of these findings and the state of my health at this moment, I decided to wait until you had been informed.”

The next voice Aileen heard was low and beautiful, but it caused her blood to freeze. It was the voice of a man who intimidated so well that he knew he didn’t have to talk above a moderate tone and everyone around would jump to do his bidding.

“I thank you for calling me in on this matter so quickly. I have contacted the head of scientific studies, and she will be here when the sun sets, to examine your finds. The sun will be up soon, and Midas’ mate will need rest.”

Aileen felt Mykil jerk in reaction. But the voice of the leader continued before she could figure out what he reacted to.

“If you don’t mind, I wish to interview you all. But it’s late, so we will wait until next moon-rising, and then I will meet you all at Midas’ house, where we will conduct an official inquiry.”

Abruptly, the tension level dropped. Mykil’s grip on her wrist relaxed enough that she could step around him. Shiye Moonshadow had left as silently as he had arrived. The men all exhaled heavily as if they had been holding their breaths. Aileen was slightly stunned. These men had faced, fought, and won against a crazed maniac, but were seriously stressed about having to speak to a quiet, seemingly controlled man. It caused Aileen to wonder just how powerful that vampire really was.

Aileen looked at each of the vampires in the cavern. Each was as seemingly invincible as any man she had ever met, so if they were intimidated by one man ...

Mykil glared at her and stated emphatically, “We are not intimidated by him. It’s more of a healthy respect.”

Aileen noticed that Mykil’s statement had caused the other two to glare at her and nod. She took the coward’s way out and only said, “Yes, dear, you’re absolutely right.” She felt justified when they all nodded at her acquiescence and prepared to leave for their own homes.

They each said their farewells and went their respective ways. It took practically no time at all to return home, compared to how long it had taken to actually find the cave in the first place. Jonsie and Bardell had arrived shortly before Mykil and Aileen, and the humans waited for them in the library.

Mykil took one look at Bardell -- who still wore the chains and cuffs -- and motioned for the man to join him to remove the offending restraints.

Aileen crossed to the couch that Jonsie perched on and literally collapsed onto it.

“What a night,” she breathed out.

Jonsie patted her hand and asked, “What all happened? Bardell hasn’t said much of anything except that the rogue is dead. And what is with those chains he’s wearing? He has been fiddling with them since I picked him up, but he won’t tell me a darned thing.”

Aileen shook her head and muttered, “Men,” under her breath. Aileen told her about finding the cave and Bardell being strapped to the palladodymite table.

Jonsie nodded her head. “I have heard of the metal during my years living with Mykil. Checking for traces of palladodymite is one of my most important jobs, and I handle it personally. The Society developed a meter that reads the content of arsenic in any given metal, and everything that enters Mykil’s sphere is checked for the metal. If the meter reads above a certain level, the item in question isn’t allowed in the house. Also, the meter isn’t allowed out of a vampire’s household, because it isn’t available to the general public. It’s owned and used only by the Society, and like some other items we have, the individual vampire and his household are wholly accountable for it. If any of the Society’s private inventions disappear, it would have to be found immediately. If it falls into inappropriate hands, the vampire of the household would have to retrieve the item and blank the mind of the possessor.”

Aileen looked at Jonsie with wide eyes. “Whoa! I’m going to have to check those doohickies out. Sounds interesting.”

“Not now, though. I want to know what happened in the cave.”

“I have never been so afraid in my life. I don’t think the crazy vampire we found is really the one in charge. His mate had been killed, and I think someone else planned her death. Some other vampire is involved, I just know it.” She paused to take a deep breath. “The rogue had palladodymite under his nails, and Alexi almost died. Mykil ripped the rogue’s head off, then watched the rogue burn. That was the most disgusting smell ever. I still don’t know if he spontaneously combusted, or if Mykil set him on fire.”

Jonsie sat spellbound. “Goodness, is Alexi going to live?”

“Yes. We accidentally found out that sulfur water seems to cure the effects of the metal poisoning. So we had dinner and called the leader.” Aileen looked at Jonsie with twinkling eyes. “Now, that man is interesting.”

“How so?”

“He’ll be here at sundown, and then you can see him for yourself. Don’t be surprised if Mykil places a shield around us. Evidently, the leader makes the men nervous enough to warrant total protection for family members.” Aileen laughed.

Shaking her head, Jonsie stood and pulled Aileen to her feet. “Enough for now. It’s almost dawn, and you have to be downstairs. Let’s go.” She pulled Aileen to the bookcase and opened the panel. The ladies walked through it and then closed the panel behind them.

While Aileen got ready for bed, Jonsie puttered around the room. Finally, she shot a crafty glance toward Aileen. “When you said that the leader was interesting, you weren’t saying that you were interested in him, were you?”

Aileen looked at Jonsie in confusion for a second, then laughed and shook her head. “I couldn’t be interested in him that way. He’s interesting, but he isn’t Mykil.” Aileen closed her eyes and sighed. “Mykil makes me tremble. If he’s near, I want to touch him, and as soon as I do, I want more. It’s as if there’s no other man in the universe for me but him.” Opening her eyes and looking at Jonsie, she tried to explain the difference in her interest in the men. “With Mr. Moonshadow, it’s an entirely different kind of interest. It isn’t sexual at all. As

a matter of fact, he's kind of scary. I only got a glimpse of him before Mykil put me behind him, but I heard his voice, and that's what's interesting. He would make a great character in one of my stories."

"Well, that's all right, then. As long as you haven't fallen for another vampire." Jonsie took Aileen's discarded clothes, then left the room, and Aileen entered the bathroom to take a shower.

Mykil dug through Bardell's tools, looking for something to remove the cuffs. He found a large bolt cutter and carefully cut off the twisted metal that held the cuffs together. He wanted to turn them over to the scientists in the best shape possible.

Bardell placed the offensive metal into a burlap sack that he kept in his workroom. He carefully inspected the bag to make sure it had no holes or frayed spots that could result in a vampire inadvertently touching the deadly metal.

Taking the bag back to the house, Bardell looked at the sky. "Mykil, you had better get inside; it'll be light momentarily." He went into the kitchen, where he found Jonsie making tea.

Jonsie looked up when he entered. "Did you get those horrid chains off?"

"Yes. That's what's in this bag. We have to put it somewhere safe until the Leader gets here tonight. Where do you want to put it for now?" When Jonsie indicated where she put the devices of vampire origin, he nodded and placed the bag there. Jonsie had a cubbyhole behind the fridge that contained her household secrets, the books that contained the accounts for Mykil's properties, and a stash of cash in case of emergency were hidden here as well.

Jonsie watched Bardell while he placed the bag in the bolt-hole and then pushed the refrigerator back into its original position. He went to the table and sat. Rubbing his wrists where the cuffs had chafed his skin, he glared at the fridge. "I will sure be glad to give those disgusting things to the Leader when he shows up later."

Jonsie, not realizing Mykil had entered the kitchen just after Bardell, asked about the Leader. "He must be terribly handsome. Aileen said that she would like to base a character on him." Mykil flinched, and Jonsie finally noticed him standing in the corner of the room. "Hello, Mykil. Why are you standing over there? Come over here and have a seat."

“When did Aileen say that she wanted to use Moonshadow as a character?” He couldn’t help that his voice was a growl and his eyes glowed. His anger was so overwhelming, he was unable to control his reactions. He had to know now if Aileen thought she would leave him. Never. When Jonsie didn’t answer him, he continued, “Does she think she can leave me for him? She won’t leave me. I’ll not allow it!” The last he shouted as he stormed from the room.

“Mykil, wait! You misunderstood!” Jonsie tried to stop him, but he wasn’t in the mood to listen. He blocked out everything but the distant sound of Aileen humming slightly off key in the shower.

Jerking the panel open to the downstairs room, he entered the stairway, slammed the door, and threw up an impenetrable barrier. No one could enter and no one could leave the hidden room.

Aileen left the bathroom, still drying her hair with a towel when she saw Mykil headed in her direction. Smiling, she dropped the towel and raised her arms to embrace him.

Angrily pushing her arms away from him, he snarled at her. “You are never going to leave me for anyone else. Never, do you understand me? I will kill any man who thinks to take you away!”

“What the heck are you talking about? I don’t have any plans to leave you. Where did you get the idea that I did?” Aileen looked confused, but Mykil was so furious he just stared at her with his eyes glowing and his teeth fully exposed.

“Don’t deny it, Aileen. Why else would you want to use Moonshadow as one of your characters unless you’re attracted to him? I won’t let you leave me. Ever. Do you understand?” Grabbing her by the shoulders, he shook her twice.

“Mykil, stop! You’re hurting me!” she yelled at him.

He immediately let her go, and she stumbled back and almost fell. Barely catching her balance, she straightened and frowned at him. “I don’t understand. What are you so angry about? I hadn’t had any thoughts to leave you, but I won’t put up with you manhandling me. Do you understand?” She stomped over to the dresser, pulled out her nightclothes, returned to the bathroom, and slammed the door.

“But ...” he started, but since she wasn’t listening, he stopped mid-thought. The red haze had started to recede from his mind, and he played back the last few minutes in his mind. Oh, gods. What just happened? He went over to the bathroom door and knocked. “Aileen, I’m sorry.” He waited a moment; she didn’t answer. He tried again. “Aileen, please come out and talk to me.”

The bathroom door opened, and Aileen came out. Mykil opened his mouth to apologize again, but she passed him without looking at him. She went straight to the bed and climbed into it. Then she looked at Mykil.

“Aileen ...” Mykil started.

Aileen interrupted him. “I would like some time alone. Please find somewhere else to sleep for today.” Then she yanked the curtains on the bed closed.

Mykil stared at the closed curtains for what seemed like an eternity. He could hear his mate crying, and it tore his heart into little pieces. What the hell came over me? I know she doesn’t want to leave me ... Augh! He couldn’t take her pain any longer, so sent her to sleep. He heard her final hiccupping exhalation and sighed in frustration.

He stumbled to one of the chairs and turned on the standing lamp. Slumping into the chair, he placed his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. Agony ripped through him. How am I going to fix this?

A trickle of an idea penetrated his despair. Standing, he began to pace and improve on the idea.

Chapter Twelve

Aileen inhaled deeply as tears rolled down her face. She rolled over and buried her head under the pillow.

“Aileen, please get up now,” she heard Mykil say.

“Why? I’m happy where I am.”

“You’re not happy where you are, and I have something to show you,” he quietly pleaded.

Grumbling about butthead men, she pushed open the curtains on the bed and got the shock of her life. The whole underground room had been transformed while she slept. The fireplace had a small, glowing fire flickering merrily in it, and a thick rug lay centered on the hearth. Soft-looking blankets and pillows had been artfully arranged on top of the rug. Aromatic candles had been scattered around the room, and when Mykil lit them, the scents of honeysuckle and a hint of vanilla permeated the room. Exotic-smelling flower petals were scattered everywhere.

It looked beautiful. Obviously, Mykil had spent a lot of time and trouble to create this atmosphere, and she was touched, but still upset about his accusations. “Jonsie is gonna kill you for getting flowers all over the floor.”

Mykil’s hopeful expression drooped, and he lowered his head dejectedly.

Instantly contrite, she started to go to him. She stopped abruptly when she remembered the caveman act he’d pulled on her the night before. Not ready to forgive him until she fully understood what had been going through his empty head, she circled the room, examining everything he had added during the day. It truly looked lovely, and he did act thoroughly chastened. Aileen sighed. She couldn’t hold on to her hurt, no matter how hard she tried, mostly because she could hear every remorseful thought running through his head, so she approached him and lifted his chin so she would be able to see into his eyes.

“Tell me now, what the heck happened to cause you to go ballistic?”

Mykil shook his head. “I didn’t think; I reacted. I’m so sorry.”

“And the reason you reacted without thinking ...?” she prompted.

“I heard Jonsie talking to Bardell. She said that you wanted to use Moonshadow as a character in one of your books. The next thing I knew, I was absolutely positive that the one desire would lead to other desires, and you would leave me for him. Consciously, I know that these fears are unfounded; you seem to be happy here. But subconsciously ... And now you’ll probably leave me anyway ...” His words trailed off, and his head drooped again, leaving him open to any hurt she might wish to inflict upon him.

“Mykil, look at me.” When he looked up, she ran her hand down the side of his face in a long caress. “Get this through your thick, Neanderthal head -- I will never leave you. You’re basically stuck with me for the next millennium or so.” She waited a moment while he digested that heartfelt promise. “I’ll never leave you, because I love you.” Aileen saw hope, then burgeoning joy, flash through his eyes, and she shook her head. “Are you telling me that you didn’t know?” When he shook his head, she sighed. “You said that you could read my mind. Do it now, and see how I feel about you.”

Mykil opened his focus and tentatively entered her mind. Instantly he was surrounded by the warmth of her feelings. He became enveloped by her dreams of the future. In every section of her mind, he found images of himself. Her thoughts permeated his heart and wrapped it in a thick cocoon impervious to any fears of abandonment. Mykil saw that when she thought of him, saw him, or came close him, her entire system fluttered as if a billion butterflies had been trapped beneath her skin.

Stunned by the overwhelming feelings her mind showed him, he slowly raised his arms and pulled her securely against his chest. He lifted her and carefully laid her on the rug in front of the fireplace.

Aileen interlocked her fingers under his hair. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m showing my mate how much her love is returned. Just relax, and don’t argue. Let me be in charge for once.” Backing his plea with roaming hands, he pressed tiny kisses on her lips. When she tried to deepen the kisses, he pulled back and shook his head. “My turn to do what I want to. Please.”

Acquiescing, his mate lay back on the soft rug and watched him with a very curious expression.

Mykil slid his body down Aileen’s until he had positioned himself below her feet. Levering himself up on his knees, he wrapped long fingers around her

ankle and lifted her foot to his mouth. He lightly kissed the pads on each of her toes and pressed his lips to her instep.

Aileen giggled. "It tickles." She sighed and pressed her foot closer to him. "Do it again."

He smiled and kissed her instep again. While trailing kisses over her ankle and up her calf, he slowly pushed her nightgown above her knees. Lifting his head, he looked into her eyes.

Aileen propped herself up on her elbows and stared into his face. He was amazed at the heat she generated in just her eyes. That alone made him want to hurry, but as she started to reach for him, he stopped her.

"Please ..." He said nothing more, but she seemed to get the point and relaxed back on her elbows.

Abandoning her calf, he reached for her other foot. Treating it to the same feathery touches, he traveled up her leg toward her knee. Slowly. Very slowly.

"I'm going to spontaneously combust if you don't get moving!" She lay writhing in the blankets, panting, then started to reach for him.

Pulling away from her, he shook his head. Mykil wasn't about to rush this. He pushed her nightgown up further, until his upward progress halted at her bottom. Tapping her side with one finger, he indicated that he wanted her to lift her hips. When she did so, he pushed the gown up over her head and removed it completely.

Tossing the garment aside, he reached for a capped bottle that sat on a tray near the fire. Uncorked, the bottle emitted a honeysuckle scent. Mykil poured a bit of the liquid into his hands and rubbed them together.

"Roll over onto your stomach, Aileen." He watched as she did as he bade, and placed his oil-coated hands on her ankles.

He chuckled lightly at her groan and shook his head when she asked if he could please start in the middle somewhere.

Sliding his slick hands up her calves, he oiled and massaged as he climbed slowly up her body. Aileen moaned, and he rewarded her with a tiny kiss in the

small of her back. Massaging above her knees, he kneaded and rubbed his way up to her bottom, then skimmed over it to her back.

Aileen grunted, but didn't move from her prone position. As he worked her back into putty, Aileen began to drift off.

Noticing that he was losing her, Mykil slid one finger down the crease of her bottom and was gratified when she jumped. He gently rolled her on to her back and started at her ankles once again. This time, his kisses preceded his hands. He pressed nibbling kisses and tiny bites all the way up her legs, her hip, and her abdomen. Pausing only to insert his tongue into her belly button, he steadfastly traveled up to the center of her chest.

Still running his oily hands over her stomach, he slid his mouth over to pay homage to her breasts. Slowly he dragged his teeth across a pert nipple. She arched her back, pressing closer, moaning for him to take her fully into his mouth.

He held steadfast. Mykil chuckled and ignored her silent demands. Laving his tongue across the part she most wanted him to, he rolled the flowering nub between his tongue and the roof of his mouth until she squirmed. When he had her wiggling to his satisfaction, he switched to the other breast and gave it the same treatment.

He finally moved up her neck to her ear, whispering things that he knew she barely heard but which caused her system to quiver and lurch. She turned her head, catching his mouth in a deep, almost frantic, kiss. "I need you now, my love." She barely ground out her order between the gasping breaths.

Turning his attention to the heart of her desire, he slid his honeysuckle-scented fingers through her dark curls and tenderly ran his fingertip around the aching bud of her desire. Biting her bottom lip with sharp, white teeth, Aileen restlessly slid her legs over his. When Mykil abandoned the torment and dipped one long finger into her, she cried out and inhaled jerkily.

Mykil stopped, not ready for her to reach her ultimate goal yet. When she was able to draw a full breath, he pulled his hand back. Aileen groaned at the loss, but was soon arching into him while he filled her again using two fingers. Using only his hand, he brought her to the highest point she could withstand without tipping her over the edge.

Kissing and nibbling his way back down her body, he spread her legs open further with his shoulders. Blowing gently on her dark, damp curls, Mykil waited until Aileen arched her hips high in reaction, then slid his shoulders under her legs. Gripping her undulating hips firmly with his strong hands, he once again blew his hot breath across her aching center.

Aileen screamed from behind clenched teeth when he finally placed his mouth on her. Rubbing his lips and tongue on her, in her, doing things to her, as she murmured encouragements. He suckled gently on the hidden bundle of nerves he found there and repeatedly laved at her pussy. Loving her deeply, he moaned low in his throat.

Abruptly, Mykil pulled away from her. Aileen cried out, and her eyes flew open as she objected. He stood, and while looking heatedly down on her naked, writhing body, he hurriedly disrobed and rejoined her on the petal-strewn carpet.

Aileen ran her soft hands up his stomach and chest, then behind his neck, digging her fingers deeply into his hair, then pulling his mouth down to hers. Unable to withstand another moment without claiming her fully, Mykil settled into the apex of her thighs, and tilting her hips up just so, he penetrated her smoothly and didn't stop until he was buried fully within her ... mind and body.

Both groaned loudly at the exquisite sensation of complete immersion into each other's souls. He let Aileen know how it felt for him as he thrust into her repeatedly and that he considered himself branded by her body and by her love.

He, in turn, knew the absolute fullness that she knew as he loved her. She overflowed with him in every part of her. They were in each other's minds so deeply that they could not tell where one left off and the other began. It ceased to matter as they simultaneously reached for and then crested their mutual rapture. The Fourth of July didn't have as many fireworks or explosions as they saw once they reached fulfillment.

Mykil buried his face in the curve of her neck and struggled to regulate his breathing. Aileen was clinging tightly to him, also trying to breathe. Dropping fleeting kisses onto his hair, she rubbed his back soothingly.

"Do you forgive me for acting the ass?" Mykil asked hesitantly.

"Oh, Mykil, I forgave you as soon as I saw the depths of your despair. I slid into your mind when you weren't concentrating, and all I read was the anguish

in which you had immersed yourself.” She paused, and when he lifted his head and looked into her eyes, she glared at him. “This will not be a situation we’ll have to deal with again, is it?”

Mykil’s lips twitched, but he gave her a serious answer. “I’ll never inflict my jealousies upon you again. However, I cannot guarantee the safety of any male who thinks to take you from me.”

Probably realizing that this was all the concession she would likely receive from him, she nodded and informed him, “In the name of fairness, I will happily inflict bodily harm on any female who tries to usurp my place in your arms.”

Mykil gave her a tiny, sipping kiss and called her his hero.

* * * * *

After bathing and dressing, they quickly headed to town and fed. They didn’t linger. Mykil wasn’t comfortable with the thought of Jonsie and Bardell greeting the Leader alone.

Mykil sat in a chair in the parlor, and Aileen was comfortably ensconced in his lap, when they felt a mass vibrational disturbance that signaled several vampires in the area headed their way. Mykil stood with Aileen still in his arms, turned, and settled her back into the chair. Mentally, he called to Bardell and Jonsie, and when they came into the parlor, he asked them to stay near Aileen. When they stood near the chair, he surrounded the three of them in the strongest green barrier he could manage.

Jonsie sat on the arm of the chair, and Aileen placed her hand on the older woman’s leg. Bardell stood behind the chair and placed his hand on each of the women’s shoulders, closing the loop. Mykil noticed and approved of the supportive connection his family demonstrated. The vampires were close, so he sent a thought at the door, opening it to allow them into the house.

Placing himself between his family and the visitors, he watched as first Alexi, then Johann and Shiye, entered the room. Alexi and Johann crossed the room and stood near Mykil, placing themselves between Shiye and the chair Mykil had shielded.

Shiye stepped further into the room and looked around. Noticing the telling positioning of his top men, he acknowledged it and settled into a chair.

“Angela,” he called softly. Immediately, a determined-looking woman with rust-colored hair scraped back in a bun, tortoiseshell glasses, gray-skirted, two-piece business suit, gray pumps, a bright rainbow-colored scarf, and a light blue shield strode into the room. She was pretty in a studious way, and without looking up from the clipboard she carried, she started firing questions at the group.

“Ahem. Let’s see now. Who is it that was strapped to this alleged palladodymite table?” She looked up, and when Bardell opened his mouth to answer, she cut him off and continued speaking. “Right, the human male. Is the table still intact?”

She looked up again, and when she saw more than one head shake negatively, she sighed. “Where are the missing parts? In the cave with the table? No? Is it in this house? Yes? Now we’re getting somewhere!”

A smoky male voice with a pronounced Texas drawl cut her off. “Darlin’, are you badgering the witnesses again? You know, you really must learn to give people a chance to answer one question before you ask more.”

Aileen looked to the door and saw a ruggedly handsome man come into the room and stop at the entrance. He had short, dark brown hair -- from what she could see under the black cowboy hat -- and a heavy five-o’clock shadow. He wore jeans, a snap flannel shirt, and well-worn cowboy boots. Wow! Do they make ugly men? I sure haven’t seen one yet. The stranger sauntered up behind the talkative woman and slid both arms around her waist.

He briefly glanced around the room at the other occupants and nodded. “Have you even introduced yourself to Mykil’s family yet?” He chuckled when she shook her head negatively. “I thought not. Howdy, y’all. I would like to introduce you to my mate, scientist extraordinaire and the Society’s Archimedes, Angela. I’m Stephen, and I’m only here to see to the safety of my mate.”

Angela relaxed into his arms for a moment and smiled. Shaking off the lassitude, she stood straight and looked at her clipboard again. “Thank you, dear. Now, where were we? Oh, yes. Where are all the parts of the table?”

Her mate, Stephen, just shook his head, gave her a last squeeze, turned, and settled into the nearest seat. He monitored her movements carefully and followed as she accompanied Mykil to retrieve the cuffs and chains to take back to the cave.

Glancing at the leader, she raised a brow at his wardrobe. He had on a tan, beaded, animal-hide vest over his long-sleeved red shirt. His shoes were knee-high moccasins, and woven into his long black hair she saw a brown-and-white-speckled feather. He wore quite a bit of turquoise and lapis lazuli jewelry. The stones were set in silver and complemented his cinnamon-colored skin. She wondered if the native outfit was worn with the express purpose to subtly mess with his friend. Cowboys and Indians. The thought made her smile. It would lend a bit of normalcy to this very intense vampire. When he glanced her way and winked one chocolate-brown eye, Aileen gasped, colored, and looked down. Jeez, Louise. I have to remember that these guys read minds. How embarrassing.

Mykil returned shortly with Angela still bombarding him with rapid-fire questions and not waiting for answers. Aileen laughed, and Stephen shook his head dejectedly as he entered the room behind them. Eventually, Angela's questions were answered to the best of their abilities, and she walked in circles around the parlor, writing on her clipboard and mumbling to herself.

For the first time since he'd sat down, Shiye stirred. Every male in the room went on alert. "I am sending men to retrieve the table and transport it to Angela's lab. One of you must accompany Angela and Stephen to the site so she can oversee the move."

Alexi stepped forward. "Since I already have to go to the lab so she can run some tests, I will escort them there."

Angela looked up when he mentioned the tests, and began to nod emphatically. "Yes, I definitely want tests. Hmm, I'll want skin and blood samples. And motor skills tests ..." She went on writing on her clipboard and outlining the tests she wanted to run as her mate steered her out of the parlor and outside.

Alexi silently followed the distracted scientist and her mate.

Shiye waited until the threesome left before he commenced speaking. "It seems we have a possible situation. You have stated that, from the way the rogue talked, there must be someone pulling his strings. I want to know who that person is. Midas, as you are the most qualified, I want you to ... how should I put this? ... follow the money. You will have to trace Owen McNeely as far back as possible, following his money trail."

Mykil nodded and looked to be already considering his initial steps. "How discreet do you want me to keep my inquiries?"

Shiye answered with an unequivocal: “Absolute. Guardian, Enforcer, Midas, Regulator, and Archimedes are the only departments I am going to bring in at this time. As the heads of these departments are the ones involved, I would like it to stay with the heads. If it can be managed, you’ll need to do the work without any assistance from either your own departments or anyone else’s. Understood?”

Johann and Mykil answered positively. Mykil asked if his family would be able to assist since they had already been involved. Shiye nodded in the affirmative, then continued speaking.

“Keep me updated. Something is going on; I can feel it. We need to know what it is and how big of a threat it is. Also, we need to know if it is a localized threat, or if it will affect the entire Society. Midas, do you have any questions before you get started?”

“Not at this time, Leader, but I will need access to your email address and any phone number that you have that is absolutely private. If we are going to keep this in-house, then we are going to have to be able to get in touch with each other at any given time.” He walked over to a small writing desk that perched in the corner and pulled out paper and pen. They traded pertinent information, making copies for the absent vampires. Shiye nodded, satisfied, and took one final look around the room. Noticing the shielded trio, he smiled and put up one hand, palm out, and bade them farewell.

The three men exhaled, and Mykil dropped his shield. Aileen glanced questioningly at Jonsie. “So ... I don’t know; he didn’t seem very dangerous to me. How about you, Jonsie?”

“Nope, didn’t seem very nasty to me, either. I think you guys are just overreacting. Did you notice the scientist only had a shield our way and not the Leader’s? I don’t think that the cowboy was worried that she would be harmed from Shiye Moonshadow’s direction.” Ignoring the squint-eyed, incredulous looks the men threw at the women, Jonsie stood and invited Aileen into the kitchen for some refreshments and woman-talk. “The men think they have important man-stuff to talk about. I can see it in their eyes. Let’s go into the kitchen and talk about them.”

Taking a laughing Aileen by the hand, Jonsie led the way out of the parlor, leaving the men forcibly stating that, indeed, they did have man-stuff to talk about and the women should go do dishes or some other type of female work.

* * * * *

Aileen and Jonsie sat in the kitchen laughing and folding laundry.

“When do you manage to clean the downstairs room?” Aileen had been pondering this for a while. “It’s like cleaning fairies have invaded the room every time I leave it.”

“I wait until you and Mykil go out to feed, and swoop in and tidy up. I need to make a new schedule so that I can do the heavy cleaning at a time that won’t disturb the two of you.” Jonsie pulled out a thick personal planner and opened it. “Let’s see. I have a crew that comes in on Thursdays to do the rest of the house, but that room is my responsibility.” She glanced at Aileen mischievously. “It’s easier to keep it a secret that way.”

“Whatever your schedule is, keep it. As a matter of fact, I can help on that day. I really need to get back to work on my books, but I’m sure that I can find time to clean up after myself.”

Laughing often, the women finished the laundry, then went looking for the men. They didn’t find anyone in the parlor, and after a thorough search, they concluded that the men must have gone downstairs.

Deciding to check, they headed for the bookcase. As soon as they opened the passageway, they heard explosions and shouting. They hurried down the last of the steps and ran across the room to one of the hidden doorways that Aileen hadn’t explored yet. Placing her hand in the correct spot, the door popped open. The room turned out to be a well-stocked office. They found multiple computers with every attachment imaginable, filing cabinets, antique desks, comfortable-looking chairs, and three grown men attempting to save the galaxy.

The women stared, shocked. The men jumped up and down, and the ones not playing the computer game shouted instructions and strategies at the top of their lungs. Johann, who sat in the pilot’s chair, had an elaborate joystick in his hands and leaned hard in whichever direction he sent his character.

Explosions and cries of the dying blasted out of the speakers. With Mykil and Bardell cheering at every scream of agony, the noise level was unbelievable.

Aileen glanced at Jonsie and shook her head in astonishment. Stepping fully into the room, she stood, hands on hips, and glared at the men. When they

didn't notice her entry or her very impressive glare, she cleared her throat noisily. They blithely continued with their game.

Jonsie tapped Aileen on the shoulder and shook her head. Pulling her by the arm, Jonsie led her out of the office. Closing the door behind them, they crossed to the chairs and threw themselves into them. They quietly listened to the continuing ruckus coming from the room for a few moments. Accidentally catching Jonsie's eye, Aileen started to snigger. Jonsie started to chuckle. They tried to stop, but Aileen choked and snorted. Both women lost control at that and started to laugh uproariously.

* * * * *

Near dawn, Aileen climbed into the large bed and closed the curtains behind her. Mykil was propped up against the headboard, hands behind his head, staring off into space. She crawled toward him and lay next to his large, warm body. Curling into him, she asked him what he had on his mind.

"I'm just thinking." Mykil welcomed her with open arms and settled her lithe body close to his own. Sliding down in the bed and tightening his arms until she relaxed against him with her head on his chest, he kissed her forehead and closed his eyes.

"About what?"

"About how we need to run this search." Casually, he ran his hand up and down her arm.

"And what have you decided?" Turning her head slowly, she ran her tongue across one male nipple.

Mykil sucked in a breath. "I have decided ... I have decided ... Aileen, dear heart, I can't think when you do that."

Sending her hands skimming across his torso and below his waist, she wrapped her nimble fingers around his turgid manhood and slipped down his body. Deftly, she began to subject him to the most loving torture he had ever known. Her mouth was scalding hot, and what she lacked in knowledge, she compensated for in imagination. "Why do you need to think at all?"

Unable to take more, he pulled her up his body and kissed her deeply. Rolling over and on top of her, Mykil thrust deep and hard into her more-than-ready

body, seating himself fully with one stroke, causing her to groan loudly. Continuing his powerful penetrations and breaking the kiss, he gently licked at the pulse point on her neck. When she tilted her head away to give him better access, he sank his teeth deeply and feasted. Opening his mind, he shared with his mate the rapture she brought him.

The combined sensations of his body, mouth, and mind threw her hard over the edge, and she exploded into a million stars. Unable to fight the feeling of her satisfaction, Mykil joined her in fulfillment.

Attempting to catch their breaths, Aileen asked, “What did you say you decided?”

“Hmm? Oh, since I haven’t found anything unusual in his accounts, I decided that we have to talk to the person who last had contact with Owen McNeely.”

Aileen’s eyes flew to Mykil’s. “That means ...”

Mykil grinned evilly. “We need to visit Troy again. His nose might be healing, and I wouldn’t want that to happen.”

Chapter Thirteen

Troy didn't even bother trying to close the door this time; he turned and started running from the room. Mykil leapt after him. Easily catching him, Mykil spun him around and pushed him onto the couch.

"What's your hurry, Troy? I just want to ask you a couple of questions."

"What's my hurry? You have to be kidding! What do you want now? You've had cops in and out, asking me questions all the time, and now you want to bug me some more! Ask, and then get the hell out of my life." Troy kept a hand over his nose. "I would prefer not to have it broken again, thank you very much."

Aileen strolled into the room behind Mykil and sat on the arm of a chair opposite Troy. "We don't want to break your nose again, Troy."

"Speak for yourself."

"Mykil, please. We are just here for some information. You give us what we want, and we'll leave you alone long enough for you to get out of town. Acceptable?"

"Of course that isn't acceptable. I still haven't gotten what I want."

"I really wouldn't count on you getting what you want, so your best bet would be to give us what we want and disappear. We'll even drop the charges."

Aileen leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees. "Otherwise, I will let Mykil do as he pleases to you. I'm sure it won't be pretty."

"Thank you, my dear. I can assure you it won't."

Troy looked between the two of them and sighed. "What do you want?"

"I want to know about the man who sent you to Mykil's house. Was he with anyone? If he was, who was it?"

Troy glared at Aileen, but answered her questions. "Yeah, the redhead was with someone. Two someones, actually. A driver and a guy in the back seat of the car."

Mykil glanced at Aileen. She looked back at him and raised one brow. "What did they look like?"

“The driver was a Hispanic man in a three-piece suit and an earpiece. Sunglasses, too. Reminded me of the FBI, with his high-tech gadgets. I’m pretty sure he had a gun. Don’t know anything else about him.”

“Did anyone say his name?” Mykil crossed over to where Aileen sat and stood near her. Aileen leaned her shoulder on his hip, and he put his arm around her.

“Nope. No name for him, but the other one, in the back, I heard him called Lord Farthangale. The redhead said it as he was getting back into the car. He said, ‘It is taken care of, Lord Farthangale.’”

Aileen looked up at Mykil, and when he glanced down at her, she pinched his butt. “Well, does that name sound familiar?”

“No. But he might be from somewhere other than North America.”

“Great. Well, can one of your computer experts maybe find him?”

“Stephen might. He’s the Regulator and thrives on finding people. We can give him the name.”

“Hey, I’m still here, you know.” Troy started to stand, but Mykil jumped directly in front of him before he could complete the movement.

“Mykil, please. I have a couple more questions. Don’t damage him, yet.” Angela tried not to laugh. Poor Troy is severely out-manned. He is such a poor specimen compared to Mykil.

“But I really would enjoy hurting him.”

“I know more, something more about the Lord-guy. If you hurt me, I won’t tell you.” Troy scooted as far away from Mykil as possible.

“See, I knew he had some more answers. How about filling us in, Troy? Maybe that will pacify Mykil.” Aileen was having a blast. Good cop/bad cop sure is fun. Now she understood why cops played it.

Mykil looked back at her and winked. He sighed gustily. “If I must. Okay, Troy-boy, talk to me, and it had better be worth it.”

“Right,” Troy took a couple deep breaths and exhaled gustily. “This Lord Farthangale, he had an accent. Like the queen, you know?”

“British?”

“Yeah, that’s right. British, and he had dark hair. Brown. And ... and green eyes. Dressed classy, too.” He looked over at Aileen, “Can you call off your goon now?”

Mykil made a move toward him. Aileen laughed again and stood. “Come on, goon. Let’s get out of here and go find Stephen. I’m sure he’ll love our information. Besides, the air here is bad.”

Mykil shook his head and took her hand. Glaring back at Troy, he offered him one last piece of advice. “Get out of town before I come back. That’s your last warning.” Slamming the door behind him, he glared back at her. “Let’s walk. I need to blow off steam.”

She nodded, and they started toward home.

“So, we have a British vampire.”

“Possibly a rogue.”

Aileen looked up at Mykil and smiled. “Yes, possibly a rogue.”

“Perhaps not, though. He seems to be in full control of his faculties. Not very intelligent faculties, but he still seems to be in control of himself and others. He may just be a megalomaniac and a powermonger.” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her softly on her pulse point. “That would make him stupid, but not a rogue. I’ve seen Shiye fight. He’s really good. He’s also smart and a good Leader. Not the best idea to try to take the leadership from him.”

“Not only that, but I think the other vampires might object.” Angela leaned her head on his shoulder and sighed. “If he did take over, he probably wouldn’t hold power very long.”

“Absolutely not.”

She felt Mykil press his lips to the top of her head and then looked up at him and presented her lips. He took her up on her offer. Aileen opened her mouth to give him access, enjoying the soft thrust of his tongue dueling with hers. When he slid his hands up her sides under her shirt, she remembered where they were.

“We’re going to need someplace just a little more private, don’t you think?”

“We do, if you aren’t an exhibitionist.”

Aileen laughed delightedly and took off for the woods.

Mykil stayed on her heels, but he let her keep the lead until they hit the tree line. She squealed as he scooped her up into his arms and kept striding purposefully deeper into the natural growth. She wrapped her arms around his neck and rubbed her nose at the base of his neck. “Mm, you smell so good.”

Mykil nudged her with his chin until she looked up. He proceeded to kiss her long and deeply, to which Aileen had no complaints whatsoever.

When he lifted his head, she stared glassily into his eyes. She inhaled deeply, trying to catch up with her hormones. “You taste good, too.” He had stopped walking to kiss her and let her slide down his body until her feet touched the leafy ground.

Aileen peeled her gaze off Mykil’s and looked around, trying to catch her equilibrium. They had entered a small glade, completely surrounded by trees and brush. The only thing around was nature. No vehicles, no people. She couldn’t even hear a dog barking. They were completely alone. Oh, baby!

Slyly peering up at Mykil, she raised an eyebrow. “Got plans, do you?”

“I do.” And apparently he did. He pulled off his shirt and spread it onto the soft ground at their feet.

“Do they include me?” Aileen started in on the buttons of her blouse.

“They are all about you.”

“Oh, good.” She draped her shirt with his and arranged herself upon them comfortably, then beckoned for him. “Come, share those plans with me.”

“Siren.” He sucked in a deep breath and joined her in the makeshift bower.

“Who me?” She knew she couldn’t pull off an innocent look when she wanted him so fiercely. She could feel her passage clenching over and over in expectation of being filled by him.

She placed her foot flat on the ground, then dropped her knee to the side, giving him a perfect view of her glistening labia. Watching his eyes darken even

further, she patted the ground beside her. “Come on down here. I promise to bite.”

Mykil growled and pounced, causing Aileen to laugh in victory. “Knew that would get you.”

As he settled between her legs, he latched his mouth on one breast and drew on it tightly. Aileen gasped and slid her fingers into his hair, holding him, pulling the dark strands in her need.

Even though she tried to keep him where he was, he shifted to lie at her side.

“No.”

“Shh. It’s all right.” Proving it, he ran his hand soothingly across her rippling stomach.

“I need ...”

He slid his hand over her body and slipped his fingers through the dense curls at her apex. Pressing beyond them, he inserted one long finger between her labia and touched the bundle of nerves there.

Aileen gasped and arched her back. “Oh, Mykil. Yess.”

He chuckled and continued his exploratory journey. He continued to manipulate the nerves and placed his mouth over her up-thrust breast. Aileen’s breath caught in her lungs when he sucked on the diamond-hard nipple. The combination of sensations caused her head to spin.

“Ah, Mykil, so good. That feels so good.”

Again she slid her fingers into his thick hair. Unable to control herself, she clenched her fingers and tugged him toward her.

He groaned at the light pain, but since he didn’t stop suckling her, Aileen figured it wasn’t more than he could handle. She was barely able to catch her breath. The sensations radiating from her center and her breast were like small lightning bolts shooting straight to her brain.

“I need ...”

Mykil glanced up, and she caught his expression. Without saying a word, he pressed his middle finger deeply into her wet passage.

“YESS!” Aileen rocketed right over the edge into orgasm.

She was still rippling internally when he lifted over her.

“That was so fucking sexy. I want to make you do it again.” He angled his cockhead to her passage and slid easily into her.

Aileen’s eyes rolled back. Sliding her feet up his shins and over the back of his thighs, past his flexing ass, and to his waist, she wrapped her legs around him tightly.

“Yeah, that’s it. Give it all to me.”

“Yes.” Aileen lifted into him as he bottomed out in her. She groaned, long and low. “Damn, that’s so good.”

He kissed her, first with teasing nibbles, then deeper and harder as he gradually picked up the pace of his thrusts. Aileen battled mightily against him, tongue and hips, until she thought she would pass out from lack of oxygen. With a gasp, she pulled away from the kiss and arched her chest into his. Her tender nipples brushed against his heaving chest and brought another level of euphoria.

Knowing she was making breathless grunts and audible moans, she reached for satisfaction. That, or her head was going to explode.

“Faster. Harder.”

He growled and picked up his pace. Aileen matched his pounding speed, and with a keening cry, exploded.

Peripherally, she knew Mykil followed her over the edge into ecstasy, but she was so caught up in the full body zap that her orgasm was giving her, that it was only a small blip on her radar.

Small shudders still wracked her body when she opened her eyes. Mykil sprawled over her, nose pressed into her neck. His fangs extended, and he gently dragged them across the tender skin there. Only then did she realize he had fed from her.

“Oh, damn.” She groaned deeply in total satiation. “You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

He slid his tongue along the marks he had made with his teeth and pressed his hips into hers one last time, before lifting himself from her body and lying at her side.

“I think it’s a mutual killing.”

Aileen laughed at his dry comment and rolled to her side facing him. “Is it always going to be like this? So ... mind-blowing?”

He seemed to think it over. “I’m not sure, actually. My parents died long ago, and I’ve never felt comfortable asking anyone those questions.”

She ran her fingers soothingly through his hair and kissed him on his nose. “I guess we get to find out for ourselves, won’t we?”

He wrapped his arms tightly around her. “Yes. We’ll find out for ourselves.”

They lay snuggling and whispering for some time, enjoying the glade and the night sounds. Eventually, though, Mykil stirred and said they still needed to inform Stephen about the vampire.

Sighing, Aileen stretched and yawned. She eyed Mykil slyly. “Can’t we just stay here for a while longer? I feel kind of like the only people on Earth. No worries, no hassles, no interruptions. It’s nice.”

Mykil stood and put on his pants. “Quit trying to start something. We can satisfy your unnatural sexual urges after we pass on the information.”

Aileen laughed and sat up, grabbing her shirt and putting it on. “Unnatural? Bull. You think your sexual urges are any more normal than mine, Mr. Toothy? I don’t think so.”

He held out his hand. She took it and let him pull her to her feet. He kept pulling her until she pressed flush against his chest. “Mr. Toothy?” He flashed her his extended fangs and nipped her bottom lip. “I can make you regret ever calling me that.”

Aileen moaned into his mouth. “Oh, do that again, please.” She opened her mouth so he could get a better grip on her lip. “Yes!” The electricity came back

with a vengeance. Every small bite he made on her lip shot a jolt of lightning straight to her center. “Damn, that’s hot.”

He chuckled low in his chest and licked her bottom lip, then lifted his head. Before she could manage a coherent thought, or even open her eyes, he swatted her bare bottom with a quick smack.

“Yipe!”

“Get dressed, woman, and quit inciting me.”

Rubbing her stinging butt, she grumbled and reached for the rest of her clothes. “Fine. Have it your way. But I’m going to get you back for that. You won’t know when, and you probably won’t see it coming, but I will get you back, buster.”

He shot her a sidelong glance. “I’m counting on it, baby.”

They finished dressing and left the quiet clearing. Down a meandering path that led to the house they walked, side by side, hand in hand, talking quietly.

A humming sensation, not unlike the buzzing of a bee, caught Aileen’s attention. She lifted her head from Mykil’s shoulder and looked around.

“Mykil, do you hear that buzzing?”

Glancing up at him when she didn’t get an answer, she gasped. Mykil’s eyes had turned bright red, and his teeth were fully extended. He looked ready for battle.

His arm tightened for a moment around her waist, and then he slid himself free of her and stepped away.

“What is it? What’s going on, Mykil?”

“There’s a vampire near.”

“Could it be one of the guys? Johann or Alexi?” Aileen tried to get a sense of who was out there sending threatening signals. “I don’t like the feel of this.”

“It isn’t Johann or Alexi. It isn’t anyone I know.” He didn’t even glance her way; he was totally engrossed in something Aileen couldn’t see and barely sense. “If he attacks, you’ll go to the house and lock yourself into the lair.”

“What?” She stared at him in shock, mouth agape. “You must be out of your freaking mind if you think I’m going to abandon you to whatever’s out there.”

“Aileen, you have to do what I say. If I’m busy fighting, you must go where you’ll be safe.” He slanted her a quick glance. “I have to know you’re safe. Otherwise, my attention will be on you instead of what I’m doing.”

“Maybe whoever it is won’t come after us.” Aileen knew she was grasping at straws. Whatever was out there was throwing off some really menacing vibes. “Come with me, Mykil. Let’s just go home.”

“This vampire is in my territory and causing trouble. I have to deal with him.”

“Damn it! You’re a freaking accountant. What the hell are you going to do to him? Threaten him with an IRS audit?”

That pissed him off. She could tell immediately. He turned his glowing red eyes and pinned her with a look that convinced her that he knew what he was doing.

“Home, Aileen.”

“Shit, I’m sorry, Mykil. I’m just scared to death. I want you safe, too.”

His expression softened, and he stepped in front of her. “I know, baby. But I can handle myself. I may just be a glorified accountant, but I’ve been kicking ass for over eight hundred years.”

She looked at him, contrite. “You aren’t just an accountant. I’m sorry I said it. I’m just worried and scared.”

The buzzing was getting stronger, and her fear escalated.

“I know, honey. But I can handle myself.” He tipped her chin up until she looked into his eyes. “But you have to be safe. Understood?”

“I suppose. But I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to. You just have to do it.”

He kissed her quickly, then turned her toward the house.

“I want you to go home. Now.”

Aileen took a faltering step from him, not sure she wanted to leave him, when a green bubble formed around her.

A wicked laugh erupted from the surrounding trees. “You think that will protect your woman, vampire?”

Mykil looked in the direction the voice came from. “I think it will absolutely protect my mate. Show yourself.”

A figure melted from the dark shadows of the trees.

Aileen stared at the vampire. He was tall and good-looking, but the expression on his face detracted from his good looks. It was a wholly evil look.

She watched as Mykil confronted the newcomer. “Who are you, and what are you doing in my territory?”

“Territory? Are we animals now, to defend our location from other animals? Tsk tsk. I’m above that.”

“That doesn’t answer my questions, vampire.” Aileen had never seen this side of Mykil. He looked dangerous.

The vampire interrupted her thoughts. “I am Lord Gideon Farthangale.”

“Ah, the Brit vamp that’s causing so much trouble. I hear you think the leadership is supposed to be yours.”

“That sounded derogatory. You will pay for that bit of insubordination.”

Aileen looked on, shocked when Mykil just laughed at the vampire’s anger. She was scared to death, and her sweet, loving Mykil baited a tiger. She was afraid to distract him, but she really wanted to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing.

She blinked, just that, nothing more, one half of a millisecond to complete before she reopened her eyes. But in that time, the two vampires had crossed the distance between them and the situation had erupted in mind-boggling violence.

Mouth hanging open, barely able to distinguish what had happened, Aileen watched the two men try to kill each other.

The other vampire, Gideon, immediately tried to rip Mykil's head from his shoulders. Stifling a terrified gasp, she watched as Mykil spun in a complete circle and knocked Gideon away from him, deflecting the attack.

Gideon flew through the air backward and slammed into a tree. When he slipped to the ground, dazed, Mykil gave him a disparaging look. "This is the vampire who thinks he can take over the leadership of the Society? You won't last five minutes if you try."

The vampire yelled his rage and leapt into the air straight at Mykil. They clashed together with an echoing grunt.

Swinging and landing punches, kicks, elbows and knees, the two vampires fought while hovering several feet off the ground.

Aileen couldn't catch her breath. If she hadn't been so worried for Mykil -- although he seemed to be doing rather well -- she would have been amazed at the sight of the two men beating the pulp out of each other while not even having purchase on the ground. How did they get leverage to throw a punch?

"Damn it." She looked around, trying to think of a way to help Mykil. She wasn't just a helpless female. Spying a fist-sized rock, she picked it up and hefted it for weight.

If she could hit Gideon, maybe she could distract him from the fight long enough for Mykil to subdue him? Knock him out? Kill him? Well, it didn't matter. If she could get Gideon's attention for just a second, then Mykil could end the battle.

Looking at the sky, she realized there wasn't much night left. Things would have to wrap up soon anyway. She really didn't want to fry.

"Yo, dickhead."

Neither man took his attention off his opponent. Aileen took a deep breath and drew her arm back.

"I said, yo, dickhead." She lobbed the rock and nailed Gideon right in the center of his back.

He pushed away from Mykil and glared at her menacingly. "That wasn't very smart, bitch."

Aileen felt her knees turn to rubber. “Oh, shit.” She turned to run.

Mykil had lost his grip on Gideon, and the vampire headed straight for her.

“First I will kill you, and then I will dispose of your mate. Fitting justice, I think.”

He gained on her. He had used his vampire abilities much longer than she had and could use them to his benefit.

Aileen thought she could feel his breath on the back of her neck. “Crap, crap, crap!”

She heard Mykil yelling at her. “Stop running! Freeze, Aileen!”

“Kiss my butt! He’ll catch me.”

“Yes, Aileen. Freeze, so I can catch you. Keep running, and I will make it worse for you.” He had come even closer.

Aileen, you have the bubble around you. The protective shield. He can’t touch you.

She had forgotten they could speak to each other with their minds. Are you sure? Absolutely sure? She wanted to trust Mykil. She did trust Mykil. Ah, fuck it.

Aileen skidded to a stop and closed her eyes.

Gideon laughed. She heard him getting closer and closer. I love you, Mykil. Don’t ever forget that.

Gideon, with movie-style drama, laughed evilly. “AH-HA! Got you!” And smacked right into the shield. Aileen only felt a bit of pressure, as if a pedestrian on the street had bumped into her accidentally. She heard him scream. Then the scream was getting farther away. Opening her eyes, she saw Gideon flying backward, tumbling end over end.

Mykil caught him and threw him to the ground, following him down. He then proceeded to pound him into a messy pulp.

The sky started to gray.

“Mykil! We have to go. NOW!” Aileen watched the sky. It was going to be light very soon. “Mykil!”

He stopped hitting Gideon and looked at her.

“Let’s go!”

He looked up slowly and blinked. She knew the second he realized the time. His eyes widened, and the next thing she knew, she was in his arms and they were streaking through the sky toward home.

Moments later they landed in the yard. The front door swung open, and Bardell stood there beckoning to them. “Hurry up!”

They rushed into the house and the door slammed closed behind them just as the first tendrils of sunlight touched the ground.

She heard Bardell giving Mykil hell for keeping her out so late, but she couldn’t focus. “Bardell. Take care of Mykil. He’s been in a war.” Then she collapsed.

She vaguely heard both men holler, felt Mykil’s arms surround her, then nothing.

She awoke in the lair. Mykil was wrapped around her like duct tape, and his lips were doing very interesting things to her libido.

She smiled softly and moaned. “Mm, Mykil that’s nice.”

Taking a deep breath, she --

She remembered the events of the night before and bolted out of the bed to stand looking down at Mykil. Jumping back into bed, she ran her hands over every inch of skin she could see. “How are you? How badly are you hurt? Are you going to be all right?”

“Aileen. Shh. I’m all right. Nothing to worry about.” He took her wandering hands in his and pressed them to his chest, where she could feel his heart beating.

Eyes flitting over his face and torso, she took in the mess the vampire had made of him. He had a black eye and, under the other eye, a long gash. Another gash

and bruise on his jaw line, and on his chest and stomach she found a green-and-yellow garden of bruises.

“Okay, you lie there, and I’ll get Bardell to find a doctor. You’ll be just fine.” She patted him softly on the arm, not wanting to hurt him further.

“Aileen ...”

“Shh, it’s okay. I’ll take care of you. You’ll be fine.”

Mykil grabbed her wrist and pulled her down so she lay on top of him.

“Mykil!”

He pressed his fingers to her mouth. “Listen. I’m fine. The bruises are already fading, and the cuts will be gone before tomorrow. I’m fine.”

“Fine? You should see yourself. You’re a mess.” She watched as his eye, not the black one, but the other, glowed. His mouth curved, and soon his whole face smiled.

“You must remember that we aren’t human. Vampires heal very quickly.”

She really looked at him and realized that, while he had a mess of bruises and cuts, they looked days old. “Oh. So, you’re okay?”

He kissed her on the tip of her nose. “Yes. I’m okay.” He wrapped his arms around her and tilted his head as if considering his health. “Actually, I do hurt somewhere.”

“Where? I’ll make it better.”

“Will you kiss it better?”

He looked so cute lying there under her, trying to be manly through his pain, that she readily agreed to kiss whatever hurt.

He waggled his eyebrows and rolled her onto her side. Flipping the covers off himself, he pointed to his erection. “I really hurt right there.”

Aileen laughed and rolled her eyes. Moving between his legs, she eyed him over the massive hard-on. “Right here?” Placing a very soft kiss right on the tip of his cockhead, she watched his reaction.

He reacted beautifully. His whole body clenched, and his eyes closed. He let out a groan that she took as an affirmative.

Running her tongue around the hood, she took his shaft into her hand. Taking one last look at his straining features, she took a deep breath and took him into her mouth as far as she could. He was so large that she couldn't take him all in. His scent was all sex and man. It caused a moan of appreciation to burst from her. He, in turn, gave a moan of his own. Interesting.

She picked up a rhythm of licking and sucking, in and out, that stimulated her as much as him. She could feel her juices lubricating her for his penetration. She felt so empty, but enjoyed giving him this. To take the tension off, she reached between her legs with her free hand and slid her fingers between her wet folds. Wetting her finger in her own juices, she rubbed her fingers repeatedly over her clitoris, causing herself to shiver.

Enjoying the feeling of her own manipulations and the velvet-covered steel that she took as far into her mouth as she could, she emitted another groan.

Feeling Mykil's hands sliding into her hair, she glanced up. He watched her with gleaming eyes. "I want to taste. Turn around and climb over me."

Scrambling, she did as he asked and positioned herself so that she could reach his cock with her greedy mouth, while his mouth could latch onto her needy pussy.

Aileen nearly screamed when he parted her labia and took her clit in his mouth as he pressed a thick finger into her passage. Her eyes nearly bugged out of her head, and she sucked hard on his cock. He arched toward her and hummed. He freaking hummed on her clit, and she went off like a box of fireworks!

He chuckled as he maneuvered her around so that they lay face to face, chest to chest, groin to groin.

He spread her legs, so that they fell to his sides, and gently slid into her as she relished the last of her muscle spasms. He seemed to enjoy them, as well.

"What are you laughing at?" She finally managed to regain her equilibrium enough to question him.

"That didn't take you long. What? Ten seconds, was it?" He began a slow rocking motion. Sliding in and out of her.

Aileen bit him on his shoulder in retaliation. She picked up his rhythm. It stayed relaxing instead of stimulating, an almost soothing movement.

“It isn’t nice to tease me.” She pulled her knees up and pushed off his chest until she sat astride him. “Let’s see what I can come up with as payback.”

His raised a teasing brow and let his hands slide to her waist, resting there. Waiting.

Aileen tensed her thighs and lifted so that she slid nearly off him. When his hands clenched, she slowly let herself sink back around him. Keeping her eyes on his face, she rode him.

Very slowly.

Mykil felt his hands clench repeatedly on her hips. He couldn’t have stopped them if he wanted. He watched her take him. The sight of her enveloping him, bringing him deeply inside of her, bottoming out with every stroke ... The wet noises, the uncontrolled moans and groans, the caught breaths, all caused him to slip closer to coming. Damn, she looked so sexy riding him, her breasts swaying slightly with her movements. Eyes closed, taking her pleasure from him. He could spend the rest of his existence right here under her. Happily.

Her pace picked up enough to alert his body. He tensed and couldn’t hold it any longer. Grasping her hips tightly, he lifted her and pulled her down on him faster and harder. He needed her to go over again, one more time before he went.

Controlling her movements, he pushed them higher and higher. She began making little noises that signaled her upcoming climax. He pulled her down on him hard, then rotated their hips in opposite directions, and she blew. He heard cussing, but only dimly realized that it came from his own mouth. He lost it when she leaned over him and sank her teeth deeply into his neck. His orgasm escalated. The strong pull of her mouth and pussy were too much. Every muscle in his body clenched, and with one last pump, he pressed as deeply as possible into her and exploded ...

And exploded ...

And exploded.

Mykil eventually pulled himself together enough to turn the tight grip he had on her hips into a soothing rub on her back.

“Damn.”

Aileen chuckled softly from the spot she had made for herself on his chest. She seemed quite comfortable and content to stay there.

“We should probably get up. I’m expecting company soon.” Mykil ran his hand over her hair, loving the silky feel to it.

“Do we hafta? I like it here. I could go back to sleep easily.” She rubbed her nose on one of his nipples and caused it to tighten.

“Cut that out. We can come back to this later. We have to take care of business first.”

He laughed when she groaned mightily and pressed her hands on his chest to lever herself into a sitting position.

His breath caught. As he was still inside her, he felt her muscles clenching and releasing. The view was spectacular, as well.

“Did I mention that we have company coming?” His voice sounded raspy. Clearing his throat, he clenched his fists so he wouldn’t be tempted to touch her. “I mean it. Get up and get in the shower right now.”

“Oh, you sound so tough. So masculine.”

Laughing, he reached up and lifted her off him. Laying her to the side, he climbed out of the bed, then reached for her again. He latched on to her ankle and dragged her to the edge of the bed, picked her up, and tossed her over his shoulder.

“I said, shower time.”

Aileen laughed during the trip to the bathroom, and he smiled. Only a couple of steps later, he groaned. She had decided to fondle his butt. “Cut that out. Shower, remember?”

“Yes, dear. Whatever you say.”

He picked up his pace because he knew she wouldn't stop. He stepped into the bathroom, placed her gently on her feet, and turned toward the tub to run the water in the shower.

"Get in there, woman."

"Will you take it with me?" She looked so beautiful standing there naked, with her hair going in every direction and a teasing look on her face. He couldn't deny her. Wouldn't deny her.

He stepped into the shower, and with the hot water cascading down his back, beckoned to her. "Come on, our time is short."

Easily, she slipped into his arms. Sighing, he pulled her close to him, skin to skin, loving the feel of her pressed against him. Nothing had ever felt as good as his mate. He wondered how he had lived for so long without her.

"I'm very glad you came into my life, Aileen." He was so overwhelmed, he couldn't find strong enough words to tell her how much she meant to him.

"You mean the day you attacked me and tried to kill me?"

He shook his head at how close she had come to death at his own hands. "Yes. That's the day. I would like to have courted you in a more traditional manner ..."

She placed her fingers to his mouth, silencing him.

"Mykil, I would've had it no other way. I understand now how it must have been for you. Your taste makes me lose my mind. Every time. If it was anything like that for you, there would have been very little you could do to fight the urges. I'm very happy you found me. I love you so much, Mykil. I would've hated to have lived my life without you."

"Just so. You are my treasure."

"Hmm, Midas' treasure. I like that."

He hugged her to him tightly and kissed her softly, showing her without words how much he appreciated her.

He let the kiss continue for several moments, then reached for the soap. Without breaking contact with her mouth, he began to lather her back. Everywhere he could reach, he washed.

When they finally separated, he lathered up her front. That turned out to be harder to do because of the distractions. He did manage, though, to get her squeaky clean.

“I suppose this is going to be a shower-shower and not a fun-shower.”

“That’s right. Just washing.” He finished lathering her body and began on his own. “Wash your hair; we have to get moving.”

“I can’t wash you?”

“Hell, no. We would never make the appointment. Wash your hair, already. We can come back to the lair later.” He scrubbed hard on his skin to keep himself from reaching for her and satisfying her every want and need. “You’re going to make me insane.”

At the end of his rope, he rinsed quickly and stepped from the tub. He ignored her chuckles and dried himself, then brushed his teeth and vacated the bathroom.

By the time she strolled ever so sexily into the bedroom, he was waiting for her, completely dressed and hopefully in control of himself.

“Shoot. You’ve already gotten ready. Guess there’s nothing left for me to do.”

“Nope. Best get dressed quick. The guys are here.”

He smiled when she sighed. Nevertheless, she did get ready without too much complaining.

They entered the library to a crowded room. Shiye sat on a chair reading. Johann played with a Slinky, leaning on one of the bookshelves. Jonsie puttered around the room straightening up. Bardell talked with Stephen, who had his arm around Angela’s shoulders. They sat on the couch. Alexi, who the couple were glad to see had healed well and looked to be in good health, sat in a chair with his head propped on his fist. Brooding.

Johann straightened when they arrived. “Finally. We’ve been waiting forever.”

Shiye smiled softly. “It has not been forever, Johann. Barely fifteen minutes, and Jonsie and Bardell have been very diligent in seeing to our comfort and entertainment. We understand that newly mated couples need private time.”

Johann grumbled. “Not really. There are lots of things I would rather be doing ...”

Mykil shot him a look that caused him to close his mouth tightly.

Apparently satisfied that Johann had finished, Mykil took an embarrassed Aileen by the hand and led her to a loveseat.

Mykil looked around the room. “So, did anyone find the remains of the vampire?”

Shiye shook his head. “There are no remains. We don’t know if he survived, or completely disintegrated.”

Mykil cursed. “I should have stuck around to make sure the job was done.”

Alexi interrupted his self-flagellation. “Your mate comes first, Mykil. I would have done the same.”

Mykil looked around the room, and all the males nodded their agreement. Aileen leaned against him and rested her head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her waist and kissed the top of her head. “You’re right. If he escaped, we’ll be sure to come across him again.”

They discussed all that they knew about the vampire, Gideon Farthangale. There wasn’t much. None of them had heard of him.

“How can a vampire just come out of the woodwork and decide to start trouble?” Johann worked his toy from one hand to the other.

Stephen perked up. “I don’t think he just came out of the woodwork. I have an idea who it is, but I need to do some research. I’ve started an investigation into this individual, but don’t have anything yet. But eventually, something will come out. Even if he’s changed his name, I’ll get something on the varmint.”

Shiye, Mykil noticed, hadn’t really been paying attention to the conversation. He stared at Alexi.

“What is it, Shiye?” Mykil had heard that Shiye knew things that others didn’t. Some thought it was the Anasazi heritage.

“Alexi.” Shiye’s voice was soft, insistent. “Something has happened. What?”

Everyone’s eyes turned to Alexi. He sat up and looked at each of them in turn. “I have healed well. But while I was laid up, I had a dream.”

“A dream?” Johann stepped behind his friend and placed his hands soothingly on his shoulders. “What kind of dream?”

“A dream of a girl. She’s young. Maybe sixteen or seventeen. Definitely not older than eighteen. In a military camp of some sort.” He looked dazedly around the room again. “I think she’s my mate.”

The room erupted into noise. Questions were asked, but Alexi couldn’t answer them. “I only know what I have told you. But I know she’s out there, and I’ll find her.”

Johann squeezed Alexi’s shoulders. “I’ll help you find your mate, Alexi.”

Alexi patted his friend’s hand. “I know you will, Johann. You’re a good friend.”

“I know.”

His comment caused laughter to filter around the room.

Mykil looked around the room. “I need to know if there is going to be any more trouble from the vampire.”

Shiye shook his head. “No. The vampire has been bested by you and your mate. He will be licking his wounds far from here. I would extend your security measures, but honestly, I don’t think he will be sighted for a while.”

Everyone looked at Shiye as he spoke. His eyes were glazed, and his hand clenched and unclenched as if he were trying to pull information out of the air. He blinked. “No, he will not be back for a short time, while he is repairing the damage to his body. We have time to work.”

No one argued. If Shiye Moonshadow stated unequivocally that something would be a certain way while in the glassy-eyed, hand-clenching position, then it would be exactly that way. Spooky, but effective.

With that proclamation, the group took care of unfinished business and split up for the evening to find sustenance.

Mykil and Aileen headed for town.

“Do you really think the vampire lived and will stay away?”

Mykil looked down at Aileen. “Yes. I think he will be back to plague us at some point or another, but for now, we’re safe. We’re going to have to stay vigilant, though. Better to stay prepared.”

“I suppose we should.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “I’m going to have to get back to work soon. Books don’t write themselves, you know.”

Mykil smiled gently at her. “Yes. I know. I’ve also been neglecting my duties. Things will settle down, and we’ll become an old married couple in no time. Then you’ll complain, wondering where all the excitement went.”

Aileen pounced on him, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him fiercely. “I’ll never ask that question. I’m good enough that if I’m feeling less than excited, I can make up my own.”

“Can you now?” He looked at her with all the love he felt. “And how would you do that?”

“By tying you to a bed frame naked and having my wicked way with you.” She glared at him menacingly.

“Hmm, sounds like fun. Want to try it now?” He lifted her over his shoulder and, laughing, took to the air.

 THE END 

Brenda Bryce

Brenda Bryce has been married to the same wonderful man for half her life. He gave her three children during that time.

As time passed and the children grew, Brenda took up writing to give her a little “me” time. She also loves crochet and knitting and reads to the dismay of her husband, who is tired of tripping over piles of books and yarn.

She spent four years in the U.S. Army when she was young and is very proud to have served her country.

As a transplant to Southern California she has learned to love the desert and 100+ degree heat - it is a “dry” heat, you know - and the sunsets are worth it.

Visit Brenda on the Web at www.brendabryce.com.