



Praise for the writing of Cynnara Tregarth

Games Empaths Play

The characters seemed to be so wonderfully real that I could imagine them coming to life right before me. And, wow, what scorching scenes of passion and lust! I highly recommend this emotionally charged book and look forward to reading more of Ms. Tregarth's stories.

-- *Joyfully Reviewed*

Games Empaths Play is a very sexy book, full of the scorching scenes that all erotic romance readers crave. It is the hottest romance I've read this year.

-- Jade, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

I enjoyed this love story with a twist. There was a lot going on that kept me on the edge of my seat until I was done reading. If you want to try something different, give *Games Empaths Play* a chance, you won't regret it.

-- Julia, *The Romance Studio*

Games Empaths Play is a startling erotic and thrillingly suspenseful story that will fascinate readers from first page to the last. The twists and turns that occur within its pages are more startling than the characters could believe. I loved this story.

-- Angel, *Enchanted in Romance*

I was glued to my seat while reading this book and I look forward to reading everything this author publishes!

-- Pam L., *A Romance Review*

Games Empaths Play is now available from Loose Id.

MARAUDERS 2: CALL OF THE WYLDE

Cynnara Tregarth

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This book contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Marauders 2: Call of the Wylde

Cynnara Tregarth

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Dedication

To the real Colette -- Here he is, just for you. Hope O satisfies and delivers all you need and more. LOL!

To Eric Crandall -- Way back when we were young and insane, we often mused various ideas while playing D&D for days at a time. Yet from those memorable talks the Marauders were born. Thanks for your friendship, your caring, and the fact that no matter how many years have passed, you always come back into my life at the right time. Give your lovely wife, Joanie, a huge hug and thanks from me for loving you for so long and for welcoming me with open arms.

To my kids: Tris, Drew, and Zack -- I love you three very much and want to thank you for being there for me. All my best wishes are for you.

To Shar, Lisa and Nikita -- My heart sisters, what can I say but thank you. Without you, I'd only be half a person. With you, I'm better than I'd be without you. Thank you for everything.

To Jaime, Tracey, my mom and dad -- Your pushing and encouragement has been simply amazing to me. Thank you for believing in me with my writing. It has changed me in ways I can't tell you.

To the men in my life -- Thank you for being my friend, my Partner In Crime, and my supporter. Without you guys, who knows where I'd be or how well I'd be able to keep the males in my story from being too wussy. Muah!

To the ladies of LAW -- Thanks for your help and your friendship! It means the world to me. Without you all, I wouldn't be as known or as able to spend time with everyone! LAW rocks!

To the guys at 162 INF -- Thank you for your service and your commitment to peace worldwide. Mark, Zach, Scott, and the rest; you all are the true heroes in any life. Thank you for your friendship. I love you all. Tiki Hut Rules!

Prologue

The lone Druid wrapped in black robes approached the sacred ground that stood between the mortal world and that of the Otherworld. Though he and his brethren were cursed, Morrigu knew why he was here. He wanted concession from the curse she gave to them for their failure in serving her when she demanded it. Miach tossed a severed head toward her feet, blood and brains splattering around her.

She stepped back, not looking at the head, but at Miach, the eldest of the Maraigh Druids. "How dare you dishonour this sacred space?"

"Here's the reason for my brothers and I being wrongfully cursed, Morrigu." The tall, muscular, dark-haired man stood unmoving as she approached him. "These men slaughtered the nearby village of Caer Awyddion, helping to incite you to war against your brother, Taranis. This one --" He nodded at the head. "-- was the one who told us that you'd changed your mind in how to carry out your order -- demanding that we leave your sacred town and negotiate peace outside of it, while your warriors dealt with the others."

Finally Morrigu looked down at the severed head, recognizing one of her followers -- one of her most trusted priests. When the fighting had started, she told him, Aritai, to warn the Maraighs to not leave their posts and to reinforce protection for the elders of the tribal village. Waving her hand over the head, she called forth a reveal spell to show any touches by gods. To her surprise, a mark showed on the back of the man's neck, the type created only by those of the Pantheonic Realm. It was a lightning bolt, encircled. *Taranis! How dare you? I shall get even with you. You and I know what these men meant to me. You made me curse them to an eternal life of unhappiness in forms that people would fear.*

"I see perhaps I was too hasty in cursing you and your brethren. However, I cannot remove it fully, Miach. However, I can change the range and create a way for it to be broken." Morrigu smoothed back a black tress. "Though your family is cursed to walk the

earth forever as preternatural creatures, I shall grant you freedom through your *anamcharas*. Soulmates. If the woman you love bears my mark, then you're free. However, she must love you for what you are now, and you must respect her powers as equal to your own."

"Done. We never meant to disobey your commands. All of us were deceived." His tone sounded relieved, and yet cautious. The fickleness of the gods was something he'd been used to dealing with, and she couldn't blame him.

Thinking upon her shifting of the curse, she realized that something more was necessary to cover the possibility of Taranis interfering, possibly with a traitor wearing her mark, just like now. Morrigu removed the torc from around her neck. Tossing it to the ground before Miach, she nodded to it. "This is how you'll know if the woman has the potential of being your soulmate. If the woman's mark matches the marking on my torc, she's possibly an *anamchara* to one of you. The brother who is involved with her must place the torc on her to see if it recognizes her as one of my own, or one who may be a descendant of a true follower of mine, but doesn't practice my ways. If it glows, then you'll know that she is that brother's *anamchara* truly. Now leave this place, unclean one. Go and hunt the world's evil."

* * * * *

Miach bowed his head as he retrieved the silver and gold necklace. "Thank you, Morrigu. We will look for the women, our *anamcharas*, perhaps starting in your sacred priestesshood. Once the curse is broken, we can once again take our places among your dedicants and continue teaching others."

"One can hope you shall find release soon. I shall deal with the others who bear the mark of my brother," Morrigu announced, her voice colder than ice.

Miach tamped down the flash of anger at her taking away the revenge due to him and his brothers. As he turned on his booted heel, he ground out, "If we catch the god in avatar form off of sacred ground, we will use our combined knowledge to destroy him. Be warned. Not even Arawn can prevent us from taking our revenge." Without waiting for her reply, he headed back toward the veil that separated the mortal world from the Otherworld.

An agonized scream rent the air as the souls of past, present, and future warriors protested against something beyond comprehension to the spirit realm. The pain filled him, bringing him almost to his knees. Looking over his shoulder, Miach watched Morrigu fall to the rugged ground as she let out another cry, echoing the screams of the unjust killing of innocents.

"No, I cannot believe he'd do this! How dare he disrupt the balance with this act of treachery?"

Once he stood, Miach re-crossed the distance quickly and gathered up the goddess in his arms. Though he knew the punishment of holding her was death to those cursed, he

couldn't help following his training as a Druid and as a man. "What's wrong, my goddess? What has disturbed the souls to this extent?"

"Gone. They're all gone. The women of Caer Arian, the home of my priestesshood, are gone. Those who were dedicated and marked by me are dead."

Miach's heart clenched before sinking to the inky depths of despair. So, it was over, after all. There was no way that he or his brothers would ever be free of the blood-induced curse. No woman would ever be found with the mark of Morrigu. Everything they had done to show their innocence and have the curse lifted and changed was for naught.

They would roam the earth as Marauders, always preying on those who'd destroy the lives they protected. There would be no release. *None*.

Chapter One

Owain swung forward, his arms holding the water pipe overhead as he propelled his legs to surround the neck of the scampering man. With a quick twist of his torso, the man's neck gave with a sickening pop. As he fell into a heap, Owain gracefully landed beside him. He brushed a stray lock of hair out of his face as he squatted down. He knew that he needed to move swiftly and quickly in case anyone had heard him follow this vampire.

Working quickly, he reached into the pouch at his waist and removed a rubber tourniquet, a needle, and a couple of tubes for samples. Without breaking his rhythm, Owain rolled up one of the sleeves of the vampire, then inserted the needle into the arm. Attaching the tube to the needle, blood flowed into it. Once it filled, he attached a second while sliding the first tube into the pouch, securing it in the cushioned area to prevent breakage.

He must've fed recently. The colour is rich and dark, not from dehydration. The smell of the blood leaking from around the needle filled Owain's senses. His body tightened in need as he removed the needle from the vampire's other arm. Hunger taunted him as he placed his fingertips over the needle mark, causing it to heal and fade. Tamping down his hunger, Owain stowed away the last of the filled tubes.

The man twitched a couple of times, a sign that the neck injury had started healing quickly. Owain only had a couple of minutes to decide the fate of this bloodsucker. He had to either let him go or kill him now. Recalling all he knew about the man, Owain realized that there wasn't much choice at all.

He grabbed the vampire by the shirt so that his head lolled to one side. Owain knew that he'd pay an instant price for feeding from another vampire, that of dealing with blood impurities and the essence of the vampire's nature, but he needed to eat. At least the vampire's blood satisfied his hunger, allowing him a respite between feedings. But having to

deal with the psychic imprint of the vampire for a few hours wasn't fun. He hated having to separate his own nature from that of the person he drank from.

A growl from the vampire warned Owain his time was up. He opened his mouth as his incisors lengthened. Clamping down on the side of the neck where the carotid arteries lay, he began to drink. Owain hated himself for having to drink blood, but in this case, the vampire was a known killer. He normally didn't kill his prey, but for this one, it would be justice served.

* * * * *

Colette double-checked her surroundings, making sure no night patrolmen spotted her in this dimly lit area. Granted, this was Cairo, Egypt, and not many hung about the warehouse area after night fell, but the police did make regular rounds making sure no one trafficked in any illegal items in this area without paying them first. Sliding on her skintight gloves that had hung at her waist, she picked at the lock of the building before her. Inside was Hafid al Masur, the vampire she intended to kill before dawn. Once he was dead, she could return home to Florida and once again resume a normal life, no longer one of the Helsingers. For months it was all she had dreamed of -- avenging her family's death.

Who'd have thought less than three months ago that she'd go from being an easygoing obstetrics doctor to killing vampires? If that rogue vampire gang hadn't killed her baby sister and nephew, she wouldn't have become a Helsinger, trained to take out preternatural creatures, particularly vampires who broke mortal laws. But it had happened, and now she, Colette, a daughter of Morrigu, walked among the battlefields of vampires and slayers. If she had her way, no evil vampire would ever walk the Earth again.

Unsheathing her solid silver daggers from sheaths at her waist, Colette entered the building, careful not to make any noise that would alert anyone of her approach. She blended in with the shadows, avoiding detection from any surveillance cameras or any other security that the vampire used. The large warehouse looked to be empty except for various stacks of crates around the main floor area. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness pierced only by thin streams of illumination from small windows, Colette sent a quick prayer to Morrigu asking for protection and the annihilation of her enemy. A noise caught her attention, and she quickly finished her silent prayer as she moved deeper within the shadows.

Tamping down her fear, she concentrated on how to handle Hafid al Masur, a strong vampire who killed Helsingers that tried to stop him. She knew that taking his life, even though he was evil, would hurt and ravage her soul, just as when she destroyed the other vampires who had decimated her family. When she became a doctor, she swore to protect life, to bring forth new life, not to take it. But having been trained as a Celtic shaman in service to the goddess of war, Colette knew that her bloodthirsty heritage would surface in times of need, just like now. Balance was needed, and it was her right to invoke it by demanding payment for her sister and nephew.

Another noise, this one a slight scraping sound near the center of the room, caught her attention. She crept toward its origin, keeping her cover within the shadows while her daggers were at the ready for both attack and defense. Hafid was the last vampire on her list, a list compiled with Davyd O'Connor, her trainer. After chasing down each creature involved, only Hafid, who hid behind the crates in front of her, was left to face his fate at her hands. Anticipation filled her as she slowly maneuvered forward toward the crates.

Carefully, Colette moved around the crates, checking to make sure that no one else was in the building, waiting to jump on her. Then, in the shadows, she saw him as he finished feeding. Anger roared deep in her soul that she had been too late to prevent yet another death by this vampire's hands, but she vowed he'd kill no one else when this night ended. A cry of fury ripped from her throat as she lunged at the creature, her daggers arcing in downward strokes toward the vampire.

Owain whipped around just as a woman dressed in black attacked him. Quickly, he moved out of the way of the slashing blades, though he couldn't stand up from the fury of her attack. Once again, she moved forward, words he didn't understand tumbling from her lips as one dagger headed straight toward his heart. Using a maneuver he picked up from the Orient, Owain blocked the blow, then caught the woman's wrist, shifting her off balance as he stood up.

Squeezing a nerve in her wrist, Owain caused her to drop one blade, but knew she had another in her other hand. "What the hell is your problem, woman?" He spun her backward, away from him, and she landed on her ass. Beside her was the dead vampire, no life or even soul left in him. What had the vampire done that this woman had come after him?

"You killed my sister and my nephew! I'm going to exact my revenge! May Morrighu guide my hand as it brings you death," she retorted, throwing the remaining dagger at Owain's face.

Owain knocked it away with his right arm, then rushed the woman. Grabbing her, he shook her. "Listen to me. I'm not who you think I am. I just killed your enemy. Look next to you." He pointed toward the body. "He's the one you were searching for, not me. I'm one of the good guys."

She turned her head and glanced at the body, pale and lifeless compared to either of them. Her hand went out, touching the vampire's carotid, then drew back. He saw the trace of blood on her hand before she wiped it off on the dead body's clothes. "Who are you? You say you're a good guy, but how can I know? What evidence is there that you're not the one I seek -- Hafid al Masur, the one who murdered my family?"

"I've been hunting this fellow down for a while. I see you're a Helsinger. The mark on your wrist is given only to those who've taken the Helsinger vow. Since he murdered your family, you can claim his death as your victory. He deserved death for the atrocities he's committed through the years," Owen responded, not directly answering her question.

The Helsinger nodded her acceptance as she shifted her gaze back to him. “You’re a vampire, too, aren’t you?”

Her gaze captured his, and he felt like he knew this woman, that there was something more to her than met the eye. Carefully he avoided bringing forth the hypnotic gaze that helped the vampire render their victims harmless.

Owain agreed quietly, knowing that somehow she knew the answer, but wanted him to confirm it. “Yes, but not by choice -- I’m not a born vampire.” He offered her a hand and helped her stand up. “Let’s start this introduction again. My name is Owain.”

“Colette. By rights, I should kill you for being a bloodsucker, but you’ve helped me end my family blood debt. Morrighu wouldn’t be happy if I destroyed someone who isn’t a sworn enemy of mine.”

As she moved into the pale moonlight that filtered through the dirty windows, Owain took in her full appearance. Brownish-red hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and bright blue eyes smiled as she recognized that he was taking stock of her. Her body had luscious curves hidden by black camouflage pants and shirt. Even her hiking boots were black, allowing her to blend in with the shadows that belonged to the night. However, it was the pulsating power within her crimson and gold aura that captured his attention as he processed what she’d said to him. “You serve Morrighu? The Celtic goddess of war?”

“How do you know of her Welsh name? Are you *droi*?”

Owain laughed at the question, realizing that explaining his status as a Druid could take some doing, and he didn’t have the time. “You could say I’m a Druid with my training, though my job is that of a research doctor. My family originates from the British Isles and Ireland, so we’re well versed in Celtic history and religious beliefs.”

Colette held out her hand as a smile lit up her face, her sublime beauty radiating fully before him. “Owain, my thanks for your help, then. *Bendithion*, blessings be with you as you walk your path. My blood debt is over. I should head back to my hotel and make plans to return home once I’ve had a few nights’ solid sleep.” She walked past him, picking up both her daggers and sliding them back into their sheaths. The way she moved was sensual and powerful.

He should leave her be and go back home to finish his research, now that he had new specimens. Yet, it was possible that she’d be spotted leaving the warehouse area by other preternatural creatures. His chivalrous nature chided him to make sure of her safety before going to his safely guarded home. “I’ll escort you to your hotel, Colette. That way we can make sure that there are no others of his group around.”

“I’d like that. Maybe we can discuss why we were both hunting Hafid,” she said as they walked side-by-side together toward the main door. “You know why I’m here, but I know nothing about why you sought him out. The rest of his gang is dead, unless he’s formed another one here in Egypt.”

“Vampires who are lower levels often hunt together. Though you might’ve destroyed the group he was with when he killed your family, I’d be surprised if he didn’t have others with whom he has worked close by.” Carefully he guided her out of the warehouse, locking it back up and led her toward his car that was parked a couple blocks away on a side street.

* * * * *

After Owain unlocked his car, she slid into the passenger side. Though he said she could trust him, and admittedly, her soul said to trust him, Colette remained wary of his intentions. Perhaps she should decline his offer and call for a taxi, like she’d originally planned.

“Did you rent a car? Is it around here? If it is, I can have someone pick it up and drop it off at your hotel.” He glanced at her, and she felt a shiver of awareness slide down her back. His absolute attention as he watched her was slightly unnerving, yet also arousing. Could she really be attracted to a vampire, after everything that had happened?

“I took a taxi here. I didn’t want anything to be traced back to me. The taxi driver works with Helsingers, so I know he won’t tell anyone.” Softly, Colette sighed, shutting the door and securing her seatbelt. “I’m trusting in you as a doctor and Druid to take me to my hotel. I know how far it is, so if you don’t take me straight there, I will kill you, just so you know.”

Owain nodded, started the car’s engine, then shifted the car into drive. “Smart idea in using the taxi to cover your trail. And thanks for the warning, though I’m no danger to you, as I often work with other Helsingers. You’re staying at the American Hotel, the usual place for slayers?”

Colette nodded as the vampire took a left onto a main thoroughfare. He was keeping his word to get her safely to her hotel and some part of her sighed in relief. However, there was something about him in profile that reminded her of someone she’d met recently. Searching her memories, finally it hit her -- her friend’s new husband, Niam Maraigh. Could this be the brother she was to seek out once she had finished her search? Could she have found him that easily when the other Maraighs and even the O’Connors discussed how hard it was to track down Niam’s twin? As she replayed the conversation with Niam in her mind, she heard his twin’s name once again -- Owain, just like this vampire’s. It couldn’t be a coincidence, not when Morigu’s hand guided her actions. “Owain, you’re Owain Maraigh, aren’t you? You’re related to Niam and the others. That’s why you said you had no choice when you became a vampire.”

He said nothing, but instead lifted a dark brow. She knew that he couldn’t figure out how she knew of him, but he didn’t know her. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and his Celtic accent a bit more pronounced. “How do you know Niam and my brothers?”

Colette inhaled before answering. It wasn’t an easy thing to admit to. “Niam taught me the art of destroying vampire. Well, he had Davyd O’Connor train me, but it was while we

fought to rescue Micheal Padraig that he showed me how to destroy a vampire completely with two swift blows.”

“I see. So you were trained by Davyd. That explains a lot in your technique earlier. Plus, it means that you know something of what my family is like.” Then he said nothing as his attention shifted to his driving. They sped through the night, navigating around various people and cars as the lights of Cairo beckoned people to its midst.

Once the car turned down the main drag where the hotels were, Colette released the last bit of tension she had. Though Owain hadn’t spoken or clarified what he meant about knowing his family, she didn’t ask. Adrenaline faded away as she realized that finally her life was her own and she could concentrate on bringing new life into the world once more. Owain pulled into the parking lot and threw the car into park. Turning in his seat, he reached over and grasped her hand, regaining her undivided attention from the lighted Giza pyramids in the distance.

“He and I are twins. Niam, that is. What do you really know of us? What did they tell you?”

Colette jerked her hand back, rubbing it while she considered the emotions in Owain’s words. It was as if he was angry that she knew his family; though, granted, she hadn’t met all of them during her training. Finally, she decided to answer him, holding nothing back since none of it was dangerous to her or him. “I know that Niam is a type of vampire that feeds upon a person’s lifeforce. He said that his goddess, whom I also serve, had cursed him. His wife, my friend Kirstie Maraigh née Blake, says that the cursing is true, just as there is a means of breaking the curse. I had thought it was a legend that had been told only among those who served Morrigu, to make her seem more dangerous to cross.”

“Which tale?”

“The tale of Druids who broke their oath and were cursed by Morrigu. That there was more to the story than the legend explained, including the fact that they had been set up and Morrigu had created a way to break the curse upon them. I’ve met a couple of your brothers, but mostly spent my time with Davyd and the other Helsingers over the past few months.” She undid her seatbelt, then opened the passenger door. She should just leave him, not say anything else at his rudeness, but something compelled her to face him once more. “I was also --”

“It was a pleasure meeting you tonight, though under less than pleasant circumstances. Keep your head low over the next couple of days to make sure that you’re in the clear and none of Hafid’s buddies come looking for you.” His voice sounded distant as he looked away from her. There was something about his eyes that seemed different from before, but she couldn’t tell. “Take care of yourself, Colette.”

Concerned filled her as she heard the harshness in his tone. She remembered the blood on her hand from earlier and realized he had fed from Hafid. Cupping his chin, she forced him to face her, letting her see his enlarged pupils and the tips of his incisors peeking over

his lower lip. His skin was hot, sweaty, and she knew from experience that he fought the effects of the blood he had consumed. "You fed on him, didn't you? Do you need another kind of blood to combat the effects?"

"Yes, I did, but I'll be fine. It's just hard, as his essence was very strong and geared toward evil, no matter what the choice. But you're not helping matters by presenting such a delicious temptation."

Colette released his chin as she crossed her arms across her chest. "What do you mean by temptation?"

Owain leaned forward and inhaled deeply, as if scenting her for future hunting purposes. His eyes darkened while his forehead beaded with sweat. "You. Are. Temptation. Your blood, your sensuality, and your beauty. You make a vampire or mortal man want to do wicked and wild things with you that are better left unsaid and undone. *Imigh*, Colette. Go, before I do something I will regret later."

There was something so tempting, so passionate in his tone. Colette knew that she was tempting fate and playing with something that could hurt her, but she couldn't stop herself. Before Owain moved away, she leaned forward and placed a swift kiss on his lips, then moved away, getting out of the car. Without looking back, she headed inside the hotel, shocked at her own daring. She wasn't done with Owain Maraigh, not at all since. She still had to deliver the package that Niam had given her to give to him. And if she was honest, Owain piqued her curiosity. Luckily for her, she had brought the item with her. Now, if he noticed it, perhaps he'd seek her out once he gained control of himself and he could explain why she was chosen to deliver it to him and why it was his turn to use it.

* * * * *

Damn, she does like playing with fire, doesn't she? I want her. I wasn't lying to her about that, but there is no way possible I can deal with someone like her until I've dealt with this negative essence within me. Owain shifted in the driver's seat, his gaze watching where Colette entered the building. *But why would Niam tell her our story? What am I missing?* He glanced around and a glint of something golden drew his gaze toward the seat Colette had vacated.

There, sitting on the seat, was an ancient torc. One he recognized, having seen it many times through the years. It was the torc that Miach held in trust, the one that identified potential daughters of Morrigu and if they could possibly break the Maraigh curse. How did it get there? Why did Colette have it? Why would Niam have given her the torc? Though she served Morrigu, was she truly one of the goddess's daughters?

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind as Hafid's essence slowly broke down in his body, leaving him slightly off-balance and confused in his thoughts. There was no way that she could be a true daughter, could there? Then again, why would Niam send the torc with Colette, someone who was new to the Helsingers and not connected to the Maraighs?

Reaching down, he picked up the torc and watched as moonlight glinted across the gold and silver surface. The raven and dragon heads seemed to laugh at his confusion as if they knew something he didn't. There was one way of finding out why Colette had the torc. Once he knew that, he could dismiss her from his thoughts and get back to his important work.

Flipping open his cell phone, he pressed a couple of buttons, then realized the battery had gone dead. *Dammit, I need to know how she got the torc.* He could go home and call, but then if there was something wrong in how Colette had acquired the torc, he'd have to return here to deal with her. Looking up at the doorway, Owain decided to kill two birds with one stone and get the answers to his questions.

Locking up the car, Owain turned toward the hotel entrance, bounding up the four steps easily. He inhaled deeply, allowing the memory of Colette's scent to guide him. He ignored the hotel staff as he walked past them, heading toward the elevator. Colette's scent was strong in the elevator and as each floor opened, he checked for the continuation of her scent. Finally, on the sixth floor, he scented her and walked down the long, ornate hallway. Each door was checked and dismissed until he came to one that seemed to ooze her light, sexy essence.

He shouldn't be there. He knew the woman could be dangerous to him in more than one way. If she was indeed Morrighu's daughter, then there was more to be dealt with than either of them knew. Carefully he knocked on the door. "Colette? It's me, Owain. Let me in. We need to talk about something you left behind."

She opened the door slightly, her hair swirling just above her shoulders. There was a cautious light in her gaze. "What are you doing here? You told me to leave you alone, and I did. Why are you here if you're still dealing with the vampire's blood in your system?"

Walking past her, he entered the hotel room. Spotting her cell phone on the full-sized bed, he pointed. "I need to borrow your phone, and we need to speak about this," he replied, tossing her the torc, then flipping open her phone. Without looking at her, he punched in a series of numbers and lifted the phone to his ear.

He watched as she slid her fingers over the torc. It was a loving, caring gesture, as if she was familiar with it in a way that shouldn't be possible. She turned slightly and placed the torc on the bed, then stepped back. Someone answered the phone.

"Hello? Colette, are you okay?" Niam sounded concerned for the woman who stood against the far wall waiting for Owain to explain things to her.

"Colette's fine, but I could be better. This is your beloved twin calling. My cell phone died earlier, or I'd have spoken to you without company." Shifting into Gaelic, Owain growled, "What the hell was the idea of sending this woman with the torc? Do you have any idea of the shock of being given it without the benefit of Miach or Finn attached to it? Why her, and what does she have to do with any of it?" He paced from the bed to the door and back again as he spoke.

Niam snorted in exasperation. “We’ve not heard from you since the Samhain celebration and your surprise two-minute phone call last week. What’s going on, *mo deartháir*?”

Owain ignored the question, since he wasn’t ready to say anything about his reaction to meeting Colette. “Does Miach know that this woman brought the torc to me?”

“Not just a woman, Owain. She’s Dr. Colette Wylde, my wife’s and my friend. Yes, she’s also one of Morrighu’s special daughters. At first I thought she was meant for me, but then realized that she had to be meant for you.”

Owain stopped dead. His brother thought this woman, this doctor turned Helsinger, was meant for him? Obviously someone hadn’t updated him properly on what had happened when Niam and Kirstie met. “Why would you think that?”

“I met her when I met Kirstie, my beloved. Basically, I fucked up at one point and tried the torc on Colette, after I had placed it on Kirstie. It reacted, and later on I realized that Kirstie was my *anamchara*, thus making Colette yours, since you’re my twin.” Niam paused. When he spoke again, Owain heard his voice drop. “What’s going on, Owain? You don’t sound like you normally do. You sound like you’re in pain or something.”

“I fed on a vampire with some bad essence and other lovely things in his blood. I’ll be fine in a while, once I get to my house.” Owain’s voice tightened as a waft of Colette’s scent tickled his olfactory senses. His body stiffened with instant desire as the last parts of the vampire blood began breaking down, testing his control over his instincts. Inhaling deeply, then exhaling, he struggled to ignore her own arousal as she watched his every movement. He needed to get out of there before something happened -- like him throwing her on the bed and thrusting his cock deep within her pussy. “Control is a bit difficult right now with this woman near me. Her essence tempts me like nothing I’ve ever dealt with before.”

“Her name is Colette, not woman. I like her, *deártháir*. She’ll be good for you. She’s a doctor, interested in saving lives, just as you are.”

Owain grunted in response as Colette placed her hand on his shoulder. “We need to talk,” she whispered.

Her touch triggered erotic sensations that made his cock twitch in response. The woman personified sex and tempted him beyond what he thought possible. Abstaining from sexual pleasures for the last few weeks had made him vulnerable to her, especially if she was what Niam claimed -- a daughter of Morrighu. But still there were his tests to run, and they couldn’t be put off much longer. His body warred with his mind, and he wasn’t quite sure who’d win in the long run.

Saying goodbye to his brother, he shut the phone, closing the connection. With a swift movement, he grabbed Colette and pulled her against him, enjoying her softness against his body. Growling, he tilted back her head and looked into her eyes. “I don’t have time for this right now, Colette. I just don’t, but you make me want to make the time.”

Then he dipped his head, and his lips grazed hers. She tasted of honey and citrus. Somehow, he couldn't get enough and slowly deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue against hers once her mouth parted readily for him. Emotions filled him as she responded willingly, even teasing him with her tongue as they continued kissing. A soft whimper escaped from her throat as his tongue traced the roof of her mouth. Colette's body molded against his, her heat warming his body further, his lust spiraling upward. He had to have her, but not here, not yet.

He slowly pulled back from her, nipping at her lips playfully. Looking into her eyes, he saw that her desire reflected his own. It was humbling knowing that she wanted him even when she knew he was a vampire, but he couldn't let his instinctive need to have this woman postpone testing the blood he had collected. Every second counted, even the ones he didn't have. There had to be a way to balance both and then an idea came to him. He took her hand and kissed the palm.

"Come with me to my home, Colette. I need to run tests on the blood I collected from the vampire before it coagulates too much. My home, with its own laboratory, is only ten minutes from here." He gazed into her bright blue eyes, conscious to keep his hypnotic ability in check. He wanted her to join with him out of free will, not because of compulsion. "Accompany me to my home, Colette. Once the tests are started, we can continue what we started here. I want you very badly, and I'm hoping that you feel the same way. I promise that I won't hurt you, and I'll explain anything you want to ask of me."

Colette blinked as she regarded the vampire, Owain Maraigh. There was a edgy sexiness in his dark brown eyes, collar-length, wavy brown hair, and well-developed body. But more than that, there was something about him that called to her soul. She wanted to know more about him and why he was a blood-drinking vampire. Then there was the torc she had delivered. Why was she asked to bring it to him? Somehow she knew that he had some of the answers and that if she went with him, he'd tell her everything.

But there was the simple fact that he was a vampire. They were to be hated, not to be trusted. Yet, she trusted in Niam Maraigh, Owain's twin. Yes, there were differences in how they fed, but nothing in Owain's actions gave her reason to doubt his words that he wouldn't hurt her. If the story was true, they were created like this because of Morrighu's curse and weren't the soulless things that people claimed vampires were. Then again, Riana had often told her that the scary parts of legends were to frighten people away from examining too closely something they might enjoy. But should she trust in her feelings when her logical side said to say no, since she had met him all of an hour before if that?

She moved backwards until her legs hit against the mattress of the bed. As she sat, her hand landed upon the torc she had left there. The necklace warmed to her touch, reassuring her that her goddess wouldn't put her in danger that she couldn't handle. Owain stepped

forward, his hand outstretched asking for the torc and her hand. The animal heads moved slightly to encompass both of their hands. Letting the torc go, Owain's hand caught it.

A sense of warmth enveloped her as she felt the edges of the torc slide past her neck. Owain was placing his family heirloom on her neck, as if it were nothing. Glancing upward, she caught his smile, which made him look even more attractive. She felt the flare of power in the torc as the animal heads moved and let out roars.

They both looked at the animal heads, then back to each other. Just like when Niam had placed the torc on her, the creatures reacted; though this time they didn't bite her. It was as if the torc wanted them to know that they were right for each other. Yet, how could that be? Niam hadn't explained much to her even at his wedding. All he had told her was that she was right -- he wasn't the one for her, but that his twin brother would explain more about it.

Owain's brow lifted, then he nodded. "You're coming with me and that's final," he declared. "Get your things together, and let's go."

She couldn't believe her ears. Did he think he could command her into obeying him? Oh, he had a lot to learn if he thought the torc's reaction meant that he could boss her around. "I believe it's my choice whether or not to go with you. I've not decided whether I should or not. There are questions to be answered before I even think of going with you."

"Not anymore. The torc has decided for us both. Let's go." Owain moved toward a dark-stained dresser, tossing her clothes onto the bed. "You want answers? Then you come with me. If you don't, then I'm not giving you any answers. If you know anything about the torc, then you realize that the glowing means something, Colette. Once we're at my place and things are settled, then I'll explain."

"Why not tell me now?"

One dark brow lifted questioningly. "I gave you two options. Granted, you probably don't like me bossing you around, but the fact is simple. The torc reacted -- you're special in some way, and if you want to know more, you'll start packing."

Giving in, she pulled the huge duffle bag she used from the closet and folded the clothes he tossed. He continued through to the bathroom, bringing back more of her things. While she packed, Owain made two more calls, then told her to hurry up because they needed to leave. He carried her larger bag while she carried the smaller one as they went down in the elevator. Once downstairs, she tried to stop him when he went to the front desk and paid her bill, saying that Dr. Wylde was checking out.

She contained her anger, realizing that between the blood influencing him and the shock of seeing the torc, Owain was trying to control the situation. It was understandable. If he'd just explain some of it to her, she knew that she'd be more help than a hindrance. Yes, she was attracted to him, as he obviously was attracted to her. But that alone wouldn't help explain the torc's reaction, nor his sudden bossiness. After they left the hotel and secured her luggage in the trunk of his car, she turned toward him.

“Why are you acting like this? I know it’s partially the vampire blood, but I don’t get why you’re being like this.” She placed a hand on his upper arm, trying to get him to look at her. “Dammit, Owain, I want to trust you, but this master-slave behaviour isn’t winning you any points.”

“You’re in danger. One of my calls let me know that Hafid’s friends discovered his body and are trying to discover who was there. If they get your scent, which is fairly noticeable, they’ll hunt you down and kill you. Plus, you’re right, I need to explain about the torc and doing it here is too much of a risk. My house is safe and secure from all vampires and anyone not invited into my home.” Owain glanced at the torc, which warmed at his gaze. “There is a meaning for the reaction, though I admit, I don’t know if I fully trust what it means. Just know this -- I wanted you before the torc reacted, Colette. Nothing will ever change that simple fact.”

Colette said nothing as she moved toward the passenger side. Once belted in, she tried speaking calmly. “You know I don’t get this, right? All Niam said was that you’d understand why you were receiving the torc and why I was chosen to deliver it.”

Owain nodded briskly as he started the car, then guided it down the road the way they had come earlier. They drove past the Avenue of the Sphinxes, which once was the road to a great temple in ancient Egypt, but tonight seemed to usher them toward something that she wasn’t sure she was ready for. Finally after driving another couple of minutes, Owain spoke to her. “The torc has family significance, and there’s a legend dealing with the animal heads reacting to certain women chosen by our patron. It’s another part of the legend that Niam told you. But as I said, I’m slightly doubtful of its reaction. I’m not saying it’s not a true reaction, just that due to something that happened with Niam, I think there’s a possibility that things might’ve been misinterpreted.”

“I see.” She didn’t, but what else could she say? If he was referring to the incident in her office, she knew that Niam wasn’t meant for her and so did Niam. But if it meant that the torc told them that she was personally important to the family in some way, then she needed to know how. She touched the torc, stroking the raven’s head, knowing the raven was her goddess’s totem symbol and since Morrigu was involved with this family, then the only thing Colette could do was stay the course. Perhaps somehow she was to help Owain find his soulmate, just as Niam found his. Something about that thought rang true, though not completely. What had changed was that his kiss reminded her that she was a woman, not just a slayer. That he wanted her and honestly, she wanted him -- even though he was a vampire. Obviously Morrigu accepted vampires on some level if the goddess changed three of the Maraighs into that preternatural form.

Chapter Two

With the covert driving he did to make sure they weren't being followed, the drive to Owain's place took them about twenty minutes, not the ten that he had originally promised. Colette didn't say much during their journey because when she tried, Owain glared at her before returning his attention to his driving. It was obvious that he wasn't going to tell her any more until they were at his home. Leaning back against her seat, Colette closed her eyes and tried remembering the night when she had been given the torc. Suddenly, the memory flooded her mind.

Niam gestured to the Maraigh torc around Kirstie's neck. "I think it's time to send it forward, since we don't need it anymore."

Kirstie nodded, then removed the torc, handing it to him. "I agree completely. It's time for the curse to be broken for another Maraigh brother."

Colette looked at her friend, glad that she had been healed by Morigu and Niam. When Niam stepped in front of her, holding out the torc, she lifted a brow in question. She wasn't sure she understood everything that had happened, but knew that these people had earned her trust.

"This needs to go to my brother, Owain Maraigh. When you've finished your training with Davyd, please see that it gets to him. Currently, he's in Egypt doing research. The others can tell you more once your training is completed."

Colette looked at the torc, letting out a small sigh. The memory of the bite hadn't left her yet and part of her didn't want to touch the torc. "Do I have to touch it? I didn't like how it acted the last time when I did."

Niam turned toward Kirstie, who tossed him a pouch. Carefully he placed the torc inside, then he handed the softly lined bag to her. "It can stay in here, safe from touching

you, Colette. Once you've given it to Owain, he can do what he likes with it. This way you won't have to touch it unless you choose to."

Davyd spoke up, getting her and Niam's attention. "There was some information I discovered that those responsible for Colette's loss were heading to Egypt. The vampire ringleader is Egyptian, according to the notes left behind by the high priest. Once she's done training, I'll give her everything we've got and provision her as she avenges her family."

She shared a smile with Davyd, knowing that he remembered how they'd spent part of their time already. Then Niam's voice interrupted her reverie.

"As I said, my deárthaír is currently in Cairo. If that changes, one of the O'Connors will notify you. Once you've finished your task, find my brother and give him the torc and the knowledge that the curse that binds us Maraighs is breakable. He'll know what it means and what to do with it."

Colette took the covered torc and slid it into a larger pouch that hung from her belt. "I will. Shall I tell him anything else if he asks about you and Kirstie?"

Niam looked at Kirstie, then back to Colette, a grin covering the lower half of his face. "Yes, tell him that the price of release is worth it, and that I've no regrets at all."

Colette scrubbed at her face, pushing away the last of the memory. So, for Niam, the torc confirmed that Kirstie was his *anamchara*. Which meant that he'd sent the torc to Owain for him to find his soulmate or to use it to find a soulmate for his siblings. Unconsciously, her fingers glided over the twisted bands of silver and gold before reaching each animal head. Even now, there was a warmth to them, more than would've been picked up from her skin temperature. Perhaps the fact it knew and accepted her in some way explained the heat. Owain said that he'd explain later, and she knew that one way or another, she'd make sure he did.

As Owain turned down a smaller street, Colette glanced out of the window, noticing the small, but well-kept homes in the area. Before she realized it, he maneuvered the car into the driveway of one house. Even with the single light that shone near the door, Colette realized that much of the house seemed covered with shadows, hiding from ready view of others. She focused her attention on the door, and felt her attention shifted away toward another home. *Ah! He's got a spell upon his place, keeping casual onlookers from seeing his home. Interesting. Wonder why the heavy-duty protection.*

She stepped out of the car while Owain went toward the front door. Knowing that he needed to get his tests going, Colette accepted the fact that she wasn't going to be retrieving her luggage anytime soon. Arriving at the now open door, Colette glanced around the front room as Owain gestured for her to enter. "It's safe in here. The security system was still on when I disarmed it for our arrival. Welcome to my home."

She stepped over the threshold and felt a slight tug at her before it vanished suddenly. Yet another spell to stop intruders. Only those welcomed by Owain could easily enter the home. Colette smiled at Owain as she motioned at the door. "Nice set of spells."

"Thanks, I enjoy my security while I'm working." Owain shut the door, locked it and armed the alarm system. "I've got to go below to the laboratory. You're welcome to look around and get yourself something to eat if you're hungry." He gestured to a doorway on her right. "The kitchen's that way. The door next to the kitchen is the way to the basement. I promise not to take too long with the testing."

"Any place I can't explore?"

"You'll see where you're not welcome to explore. My house is set up for my privacy and protection. Nothing will hurt you since you're welcome here, but you're sensitive enough to feel where exploring is not invited." Owain walked past her toward the locked door. Once it opened, he looked back at her and smiled. "If you need me, just yell. I'll hear you."

Colette watched him walk down a couple of stairs, then shut the door behind him. That smile was wicked and full of promise. *Yeah, that man was definitely bad for her health.* A wicked grin lit her features as she considered him in various positions at her mercy. *But what a great way to be ruined!*

On her own, she explored, first here in the living room. Though the walls were painted a pale cream colour, there were paintings and framed papyri on the walls. She went from a painting of Ireland to a papyrus that showed some erotic scenes between ancient Egyptian men and women. Though she couldn't read the writing on the papyrus, she followed the story until the end of the frame, then growled. He had separated the scroll into sections, placing them throughout the living room. While she searched for the next portion of the scroll, Colette stepped over various medical journals that were scattered on a table and an overstuffed golden beige couch.

Once done reading all of the papyri, Colette grinned, realizing that Owain shared her taste in sensual pleasures. It was definitely a plus in her book to find a man who liked kinky, hot sex as well as laughter in the bedroom. Going back to the couch, she picked up a few of the journals and flipped through them, stopping as she saw his handwritten notes down the side of certain articles. *Hmm, curious. Why the interest in genetics and hematology? What does that have to do with the vampire blood he collected tonight? Yet more questions to get answered.*

Colette decided it was time to search the rest of the house, short of the laboratory. As she wandered into the kitchen, Colette noticed the dishes in the sink, but the over-all cleanliness of the room. Even his seasonings were alphabetized, though they were not always properly capped. She quickly fixed the caps, putting the seasonings back where she picked them up. Even when looking in the cabinets, all she saw revealed the same impression she had gotten from the living room. Organized, though slightly messy, but a warm, inviting

place to stay. Owain wanted people to feel comfortable in his home, but still have some kind of order that allowed him to handle anything required. Definitely a man after her own heart.

After heading back into the living room, she debated to searching the other areas, then figured that if Owain was worried, he'd have warned her beyond that vague threat. The other hallway led to a couple of bedrooms. One she peeked into was a guest room painted in deep blues, creams, and with the traditional tourist pictures of ancient Egyptian sites. Then she moved to a room whose door was closed.

As she tried to open it, once again she felt the pressure build around her, touching her intimately, as if to seek out all her secrets. This was definitely Owain's bedroom, and as she looked in, she saw the huge bed, the dressers opposite the door, though she couldn't make much else out through the darkness. Again as she tried to cross the threshold, it pushed back at her, tendrils running up and down her body, arousing her while cautioning her not to try to enter where no permission was given. She stepped back and shuddered as the arousal filled her body from her nipples to the clenching muscles inside her pussy. Definitely not the usual spell to keep out unwanted people, since it aroused a person so much that they sought relief by leaving the threshold. Another wave of arousal hit her and she gritted her teeth, wishing that she had some way to ease the ache ... and that way included a huge cock thrust deep inside her until she came.

If he thought that she'd just take this spell that he said she'd be "sensitive" to and not get revenge, he didn't know her well. *He basically challenged me to try to enter the room, knowing what it'd do to me. If he thinks I'm just going to let it go and say nothing, he's got another think coming.* Her lips twitched as an idea took shape in her mind. He could play Mad Scientist a bit longer while she got everything ready. Luckily for her that she didn't need anything from her suitcases, but could make do. First she needed to check out the bathroom. Then, if he kept the things she thought he might, Colette would make sure that when Owain emerged from the dungeon, the only thing he'd have on his mind was her. *This will be so much fun. Well, at least for me.*

* * * * *

He logged out of his computer, leaving the experiment to continue for the night. In the morning, he'd hopefully have some new data to add to his equations. Right now, he needed a breakthrough, but nothing had helped over the past few weeks in his search. Vibrations flowed over him, warning him that Colette had tried to enter his bedroom, and he grinned. Anticipating the woman's curiosity, he allowed himself a moment to enjoy how his spell enhanced her arousal to a fever-pitch, then moved her away from the threshold. He felt her try again, only to be subjected to the spell, then stop as she moved away. He waited a few more moments, making sure that everything in his lab was settled and nothing would require his attention for a while.

Satisfied that things in the lab were developing nicely, Owain tramped up the steps wondering just what Colette had gotten herself into after being subjected to such arousal. Would she be playing with herself or trying so hard not to give into the need created by the spell? Either way, he knew that he'd offer to take care of the aching need in her pussy for her. He chuckled as he opened the door to the main portion of his home.

She wasn't there, but something had changed. Owain glanced around, then downward. At his feet was a lacey black bra that covered a journal dealing with unusual sexuality among human cultures. Kneeling, he brought the bra to his nose and inhaled. Her scent was strong, along with another odor, one of arousal. Obviously she had considered coming down to the lab to distract him, then had turned away, removing her clothes as the spell got the better of her.

Lust filled his body as he picked the journal up and tossed it at the coffee table where his other journals were. He scanned the room and saw a pile of clothing in the hallway leading to the bedrooms. With quick strides, Owain found himself before the pile. There were her pants, her shirt and ... something dropped out as he picked up her lacey black panties. Looking around, he spotted one of her earrings. Bringing the solitaire-styled earring to his nose, he inhaled, and growled. He recognized the scent of arousal as well as her unique essence, filling him with a burning desire to touch and lick Colette's body from head to toe and back again. He slid the earring into one of his pants pockets.

"Mine, you're mine. You hear me, Colette?" His voice sounded husky to his own ears, but he made sure that she heard him clearly. She was going to be his this night, and she'd pay for this erotic teasing.

"Come and get me, if you can," she whispered, her voice seeming to come from everywhere around him. He grinned as he acknowledged that she, too, knew a few spells and how to work magick, just as he did.

His fingers caressed her earring, letting her scent focus his vampiric senses. Using his enhanced sense of smell, he turned in a slow circle, eliminating rooms where the aroma seemed faded. This woman was more than she seemed and capable of playing the type of sex games he enjoyed. And if his brother was correct and Colette was meant for him as his *anamchara*, then their lives would be filled with these erotic games. Yet part of him remained cautious because Morrighu could behave capriciously, taking back the way to break the curse now that one Maraigh was freed from it. He needed more proof, but until then, there wasn't any reason to not enjoy this enticing, luscious woman. Stepping forward, he once again turned slowly, trying to discern where the aroma was strongest.

Then he heard it, the telltale noise of her moving, even though most people wouldn't have heard anything. He quickly and silently opened the door to the bathroom and stepped in. "Mine. And to think you're already naked for me, Colette. Saves me the trouble of ripping your clothes off so I can feast on your sexy body."

His voice came out a hungry growl, and he thrilled at the chase she provided him. Her heat seemed to emanate from one area of the room more than any other, and without a sound, Owain sprang to his left, his hands reaching for the warmth, touching something soft and silky. His other arm snaked around, capturing Colette in his embrace. His fingers kneaded the breast that he had captured, and her nipple peaked under his touch. She let out a slight whimper as he teased the tip without relieving the building pressure. Reaching behind her to one side, he flipped on the lights in the bathroom, allowing him to see the beautiful, naked woman who teased him so ably.

His mouth captured hers, his tongue questing for the source of the sweet taste he knew was hers alone. His hands cupped her breasts and fondled them. It had been so long since he'd allowed himself this pleasure. Being here with her wasn't like being with any other woman and he knew it, even if she wasn't aware of everything. It would be damn difficult going back after this night, if it was even possible, which Owain doubted.

He guided his tongue down her jaw, her neck, to the top of her breasts. Inhaling her scent, he rubbed his hips against her causing her to gasp at the heat of his touch. He was still alive, still human, unlike other vampires. His lips gently flicked over her nipples causing them to pucker tightly. Her body arched against his.

His mouth captured one nipple and tugged it. Colette whimpered with passion as her fingers undid his trousers. Tugging at his shirt, Owain removed it as she divested him of everything else. As her fingers brushed his erection, Owain nipped her.

"Owain," she whispered as the slight pain turned into a pleasure that she had never felt before.

"Colette, this isn't going to be slow. I need you now," Owain groaned as his hands slid between her thighs, feeling her damp curls. "I want you badly, woman."

"Take me."

That was the last thing he heard as he let loose the passion he normally tamped down for everyone else. Her words released the last ounce of control he possessed. His fingers slid into her wet sheath causing her to moan with pleasure as her hand stroked his hard cock. He walked her against the bathroom wall and slid his hands around to her rounded ass. He lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

He positioned her over him and with one hard, deep thrust, he entered her wet, tight pussy. They both moaned at the intenseness of their joining.

"Owain." Colette moaned as his lips claimed hers.

Owain growled in response as he withdrew slightly, then slid himself deep inside her as her inner muscles clenched his cock, urging him deeper. *Her body feels like heaven. This is what I've been missing for so long, this sense of completion.* Her body tightened when his fingers found her clit and gently flicked it while he continued pumping his cock deeply in and out of her.

Colette leaned her head back against the cool wall as Owain thrust into her wet pussy, first hard, then slow, each movement driving her passion higher. Her nails raked his naked back as she shifted her hips giving him better access to touch her clit while his long hard cock filled her. Each time he plunged deep within her, she felt as if he touched not only her body, but her soul as well.

Owain growled in his native tongue, speaking too fast for her to follow and then the warmth of the torc increased, almost burning her skin. They gazed into each other's eyes as he repeated the words again, this time slow enough for her to translate them into English. *"Let the light of the match be the light that leads. If the gods bless this, let nothing stop it from coming forth."*

She didn't understand what he meant, but the torc reacted, with a small burst of light, surrounding them both. Owain leaned forward, kissing her lips, then slid his mouth over her neck and pain hit her as his incisors pierced her skin. Just as panic reared up, pleasure flared more as his cock rammed deep within her, and she felt not only her pleasure, but his as well, with each thrust. Emotions swirled through her and she knew some were hers, some were Owain's. Their passion rose higher and higher as he continued drinking from her and his cock slammed into her pussy. Finally, she couldn't take the pleasure anymore and cried out Owain's name as her pussy clenched his cock, milking it as her orgasm raced through her body.

Owain flexed his hips against her as his own orgasm roared through him, her name ringing in her ears as he pulled away from her neck. Her body shuddered as his slammed against hers a final time, filling her with his cum.

His tongue felt rough, yet welcome against her neck as his hands cupped her ass, squeezing it reassuringly as they both tried to catch their breaths.

Chapter Three

Colette looked at the man holding her and grinned happily. His matching grin pleased her as her heart fluttered at the sexy look that followed his smile. “Am I allowed to come down now? Or are you planning to keep me against the wall, pinned by your cock until further notice?”

With a chuckle, Owain lifted her, then slid Colette down his body, letting her feet touch the floor, yet keeping her close to him. His body heat felt inviting, and she didn’t move away from him, instead wrapping her arms around his waist.

“Feeling a need to ground yourself by clinging to me, Col?”

“Col?” She glanced up at him, lifting one brow in disbelief. “There are only a couple of people who call me that. You’re not one of them.”

“Yes, I am, since we had hot sex. Plus, the nickname fits you. What do other people call you?”

Tilting her head to one side, she replied easily. “Dr. Wylde, Colette, or Van Helsing. Not Col.”

“I see. Which name do you prefer?”

She shrugged as she retrieved a face cloth from the sink. Turning on the water faucet, she wet the cloth, then turned off the water. With slow, deliberately enticing movements, Colette wiped the wetness from his stomach and then his still semi-erect cock. “It depends on the person, actually. Only my closest friends and family call me Col. Your brother calls me Colette, as do the Helsingers.”

“I prefer Col. It’s strong, yet feminine, just as you are.” His long fingers traced down her neck and shoulder, sending tingling waves of awareness to her erect nipples. The scent of their lovemaking still lingered, and she found the scent arousing and wondered if he did too.

Deftly, he removed the washcloth from her hands, rinsed it out, then knelt before her. With soft strokes, he washed off the remnants of their lovemaking from her damp mons.

Her fingers gripped his shoulders as he slid the cool, damp cloth between her thighs, slowly wiping away the dampness. However, the slight roughness of the cloth aroused her as he brushed the cloth past her nether lips. "I love your scent. It's very erotic and heady, Col. I don't know what it means that you're here and the torc accepts you, but I would like you to stay so we can figure it out together."

Startled at his request, Colette looked down at him. She had made plans for when her journey was finished, now he wanted her to stay here with him? "Now that my quest is over, I'm heading home to Silver Springs. I've got my life to get back to. Basically, after my family's death, I up and left a thriving fertility and obstetrics practice."

"Do you really think that you'll be able to do that after all you've seen and done?" Owain asked, wiping her one last time. Leaning forward, he placed an openmouthed kiss on her mons, his tongue swirling through her curls, before moving away. Rising to his feet, he asked, "More importantly, do you think that your enemies and other rogue preternatural creatures will allow you?"

"What do you mean?" Something in his tone warned her that she wouldn't like his answer.

Owain grabbed a blue towel, wrapping it around her body, then did the same to his with a green one. Once they were somewhat covered, he led her toward the living room and had her sit on the couch. He sat next to her and looked at her, his gaze serious, which made her slightly nervous. When they were both settled, she gestured for him to speak. "What did you mean by asking me if I thought I could just pick up my life where I left off? Why can't I, now that my vengeance is completed?"

"Did anyone tell you that in taking the Helsinger oath, you became a target of the rogue communities of preternaturals, especially the vampires? You don't wear a mask when you go after them, do you?"

She shook her head, her mind trying to comprehend his words. He couldn't mean that others not involved her family's death would come after her, could he? "No, I don't wear a mask, nor had anyone said anything about being targeted. Does this mean I can't go back to my old life?"

Owain ran his fingers through his hair, not looking at her. She knew that she'd hate his answer, it wasn't going to be what she wanted to hear. "Not as you knew it. You could do it, but you'd have to be aware you'd be targeted regularly and take precautions."

"But your brother has a regular job."

"He's a Marauder, and that makes a difference to others in the paranormal community. It's not quite the same, and he does get attacked occasionally. We have reputations that precede us so that only the extremely stupid or the extremely determined come after us now." Owain paused, his hand catching hers as she tried to wave his comments away.

“Explain to me everything that’s happened, including how you became a Helsinger. Once I know the whole story, perhaps we can decide if there’s a chance you can go back home to your old job with a few changes or if you need to start over in another town where no one knows you.”

“As you know, Kirstie and I are friends. When she came to my office to ask me about vampires and if they were real, a detective from the police arrived.” She paused, struggling to suppress the sadness that welled up at what happened. “My sister and nephew were murdered by a serial rapist who became the avatar of Taranis with the help of a small group of vampires. They were mutilated, bitten, tortured.” Closing her eyes, Colette wiped at the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks. She felt Owain shift, then wrap an arm around her, offering her quiet support and comfort.

“Then your brother showed up and tried the torc on me, explaining that I might be his soul mate and other crap. When I told him to fuck off, he then offered me a chance to avenge my family by becoming a Helsinger. Not once did anyone say that I couldn’t return to my regular life once my quest was finished.”

“What happened with the rapist?” His words cut through the memories, allowing her to suppress the loss she felt at her sister and nephew’s deaths. “You obviously killed the vampires who were part of the group, but what of the avatar?”

Colette related how she, Davyd, and other Helsingers received Niam’s phone call, notifying them where Taranis’s temple was. Quickly, she described what happened to her and Kirstie, then how the avatar was killed by Owain’s twin. “Then Niam gave me the torc, telling me that when I finished my goal, I was to give it to you.”

Owain excused himself and went into the kitchen. When he returned, it was with drinks. Handing her one that looked to be juice of some kind, he asked, “Since you deal with fertility issues, you deal with many aspects of genetics, correct?”

She accepted the drink and took a sip, the refreshing taste of mango, pear, and something else flooded her mouth. After a couple more sips, she answered him, wondering what it had to do with her being able to go home to her practice. “The emphasis is on fertility, of course, but yes, I’m well grounded in the basics of genetics. I’ve even participated in DNA studies dealing with mutations, sterility, and if sterility can be reversed using various techniques.”

Owain murmured his interest as he sipped his drink. “You know I’m a doctor, right? Not a physician seeing patients, but a research doctor.” She nodded and gestured with one hand for him to continue. “I’m doing genetic research that’s privately funded by myself and my family. What I’m trying to find is the genetic sequence of vampirism in all its forms and to find a way to reverse the process. Then we’ll be able to find an antidote for the vampires who were made, though I don’t know if it’d help those born as vampires.”

“You’re hoping to find a cure for you and your brothers, aren’t you?” Colette placed her drink on the coffee table, then scooted closer, her concerns pushed away for the moment.

“Actually only two of my brothers besides myself suffer from vampirism. But it’s a start, since it acts like a retrovirus, rewriting normal people’s genetic codes when they’re changed.” She opened her mouth to say something, only to have Owain hold up a hand to stop her. “I know Niam doesn’t mind being a vampire, and there are many others who are happy being one, but it’s a fact that those who were turned against their will would benefit the most. Perhaps it might be used as a weapon on those who continue to break the vampiric and mortal laws.” His eyes shone with fervor, his enthusiasm for his project catching her as well. Owain leaned forward and kissed her cheek softly. “Since you might not be able to go back home to your job right away, until I can get one of the O’Connors to set up precautions, would you consider helping me in my project for a while?”

Reality crashed down as she realized that if she helped him, she’d put off her return home. Though if she was honest, part of her didn’t know if she could face seeing the graves of her sister and nephew. “What’s in it for me if I help you?”

“You get to indulge in pure research, spend time with me, and hopefully the vampires who might seek you out will think you’ve disappeared or died. Then when things are set, you can return to your old life if you want.”

It was a lot to take in. Granted, he knew more about the vampire community and the way the rogues dealt with Helsingers, even those who’d retired. But she needed to think it through before making a decision. Colette raised her gaze and looked into his chocolate brown eyes, trying not to jump into his idea though his research intrigued her. “Can I have a day or two to consider this? It’s a bit overwhelming knowing that I can’t just go home like I had originally planned.”

Owain nodded, then stood up, stretching his arms over his head. Colette watched as his muscles rippled in response and his green towel slid lower on his hips. His voice was low and melodious as he answered her. “Definitely take a couple of days to think on it while I try to get an O’Connor to check into your home and office in Silver Springs to see what needs to be done for security precautions. But while you think on things, why don’t we get dressed, retrieve your luggage, then I can answer any questions about the research or anything else that you want to know about.”

Colette rose to her feet in front of him, then dropped her towel. “Sure.”

She swaggered past him, making sure to swing her hips. His low, throaty chuckle followed her as she turned down the hallway toward the bedrooms.

“Trying to tempt me to play some more, Col?”

“Whatever works, O.”

“Did you just call me, O?” Owain asked disbelief colouring his Celtic lilt.

“Damn straight. You call me Col, I call you O, as in the big O,” she teased while gathering her clothing that Owain had left to one side of the hallway. She felt his gaze upon her naked body while she retrieved her clothes. Standing up, she glanced over her shoulder at him. “I like it -- you’re the big O.”

He shook his head at her, a blush spreading over his high cheekbones. "Just not in public, Col. I'll never live it down if you call me that in front of my family or the helpers."

"But you could live up to it." Colette shifted the clothes to her other arm and walked toward the guest bedroom.

"That's not a challenge. It better not be a challenge that you're issuing me, Col."

"It could be one, if you live a little," Colette teased as she walked into the bedroom, flipping on the light so dressing would be easier.

Owain hesitated for a moment in the hallway. Did he really think he was capable of handling this maddeningly desirable woman? More importantly, did he want to handle her or be handled by her? His private mission wasn't easy and there were plenty of dangers, including those who didn't want him to continue his research. In fact, he hadn't even told his brothers about a small group of vampires who had tried to stop his work and destroyed anything they found that might help him. But he was so close to finding the answer to vampirism that he couldn't stop. So much was at stake and he couldn't turn away, even if his family told him to cease the research.

A gnawing sensation in the pit of his stomach grabbed his attention from his dark thoughts. He needed to feed and not just on regular food, though his stomach felt hollow and empty. His and Col's sexual play burned away plenty of energy and nutrients from his system. Turning away from the guest bedroom, leaving Colette to dress in peace, Owain turned around and headed for the kitchen.

He opened up the refrigerator and pulled open one of the drawers meant to store fresh fruit and vegetables. Withdrawing a couple pints of plasma, he shut the door, leaning against it. Holding one bag to his mouth, he willed his teeth to lengthen before biting the plastic, piercing it cleanly. Drinking plasma or blood cold wasn't fun, but it beat having to find a person to feed upon at various hours of the day and night. Once he finished with one, he then punctured the second one while he thought about Colette and how satisfying being with her had been -- both during sex and afterward.

He wanted to believe that it was his turn for happiness, just as his brother had found with Kirstie, but there was the doubt honed by centuries of disappointment as women they thought might fit the requirements failed to invoke the proper response from the Maraigh torc. Yet, even knowing of past failures, a part of his soul hoped that Colette was his *anamchara*.

Finishing with both plasma bags, Owain tossed them into the trash can under his sink, then after adjusting his towel, went outside to retrieve Col's luggage, grabbing his car keys from the hook by the door where he kept spare keys. He went outside, wondering what was keeping Colette so long in changing.

Late night had cooled the air even further in this desert city, and he knew the morning would be mist-laden, creating a mystical look to Cairo, which would get the early morning

tourists talking on how magickal Egypt truly was. Opening the trunk of the car, he removed Colette's suitcases, placing them on the ground next to him. Perhaps he could show her the sites of Egypt while she considered her decision. If they were lucky, no local vampires would challenge her while they went sightseeing in and around Cairo. If she accepted his offer, he had to tell her that he wasn't sure how much longer they'd remain in Egypt, as some of the data collected pointed at another location to search for the origins of vampirism.

"Let me take that," Colette said strolling up to him, breaking into his thoughts as her hand brushed his as he went to grab one piece of her luggage. "If I stay with you to do research, how long will we be here before moving elsewhere to collect more data?"

"Depends on various factors, including new information, verifying legends as fact, and historical evidence of where they originated. Some of my research is being verified through a *cúntoír* before it comes to me as being accepted. Once we can confirm some historical locales and not just stories, then we'll know where our next destination is located." He glanced at her and her beauty called to him as the moonlight shone down around her, illuminating her lovely face.

"Makes sense. What's your theory, doctor?" Colette asked nonchalantly while her hand regripped the handles on one duffle bag. "Can you share what you're trying to do?"

Owain leaned against his car and let out a soft sigh as he realized the enormity of the project he had undertaken. "It's not easy to explain, but yes, I'll share what I'm doing. Let's get inside and while I make us something to eat, I'll explain more of the research and its various components."

She led the way back in, and he enjoyed the sway of her hips as she ascended the steps before disappearing through the open doorway. He followed, shutting and locking the door first before ushering her to the guest room. While she unpacked her things, he went to his bedroom and changed into a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt advertising that he was a Guinness stout drinker.

Owain went to the kitchen, rummaged through cabinets, the refrigerator, and the freezer before finding some ingredients to make a satisfying yet not too heavy meal. As he prepped the onions, carrots, and other vegetables, Owain relaxed, allowing the stress of his research to ease for one night. He liked the idea of cooking for Colette and wondered if any man had ever cooked a meal for her like he was doing right now. Once the vegetables were chopped, he placed them into a deep frying pan that always sat on one burner on his stove. He turned a knob until a bright blue flame enveloped the bottom of the pan. The high heat allowed Owain to quickly cook the vegetables without them losing their colour and flavour. While they cooked, Owain grabbed two new glasses from a cabinet and filled them with more fruit juice for himself and for Colette. A noise at the kitchen archway caught his attention.

Colette leaned against part of the archway, her gaze taking in his cooking efforts. He smiled at her as he read the phrase plastered across the front of the crimson-red T-shirt she

had changed into along with faded jeans that outlined her lusciously rounded hips. “I have PMS and a gun, any questions?” Chuckling, Owain handed her one of the glasses of juice. “Nice shirt.”

“Thanks, it was a gift from my mentor. She claims that I have some violent tendencies that needed to be expressed publicly as a warning to others.” Colette moved into the kitchen, sipping the juice before she moved toward the small kitchen table and chairs at the end of the room.

“Knows you well, I take it?”

“Sometimes, she knows me too well. Of course, she’s also capable of doing anything herself, so it evens out most times,” Colette responded. “This is great juice. What’s in it?”

“Tangerines, grapes, oranges, and pomegranates.” Owain sipped from his own glass and motioned for her to sit down while he continued cooking their meal. “It’s one of the more refreshing fruit juice blends out here.”

Colette nodded, then bit her lip, looking slightly nervous. He wondered what made her nervous after they had been through so much, including having hot sex. Finally, she spoke and her voice cracked slightly. “Can I ask you a question, Owain?”

Stirring the vegetables a few times, he tossed in a few more ingredients, then placed a cover over the pan. Owain turned to face her. “Sure, what do you want to know?”

“Can you eat regular food for nutrition?” Colette blushed from her neckline through her hair, enhancing her loveliness in his eyes. “I know it’s a silly question, but I’ve never had a chance to ask these things of any vampire, not even Niam. Normally I’ve been killing those who’ve broken the laws between mortal and vampire, not talking to them over a meal.”

Chuckling, Owain walked over to the table, sitting across from her. “Human blood helps sustain my life, just as if I had sickle-cell anemia or some other disease that destroys red blood cells. I still need regular nourishment from other sources if I want to remain healthy, though I’ll admit that vampires have immunity from many diseases that most mortals don’t. It’s a side effect from having to ingest blood for survival.” He gestured toward her. “I’ve got a question for you now. What do you know about the vampires you hunt? Besides that, the ones you’re assigned have broken mortal and vampiric laws repeatedly.”

Colette swallowed another sip of juice, leaned back, and closed her eyes. To his eyes, she looked tired and once they ate, he’d make sure she got some solid sleep for once. He knew just how little rest a Helsinger often got while on a hunt. Finally she opened her eyes and answered. “Well, I know that for some reason, I’m able to sense vampires. They ring differently in my mind when I try to see their auras or touch their minds. The sensation isn’t anything like I’ve experienced with a human or even a shape-shifter.”

“Ah, as a Helsinger, that talent is handy to possess, since it means you can sense a vampire hiding among a crowd of mortals. It’s definitely a lifesaving skill to have. What else do you know about vampires?”

"I know there are different kinds of vampires, but I'm not quite sure if I remember all of them." She finished the last mouthful of her juice, setting the glass onto the table.

Owain got up, refilled their glasses, stopping at the stove to check the meal. "There are three categories that most vampires fall into, though occasionally there are some who don't seem to fit any category that well." Sitting down, he continued. "The categories are derived from how they must take in nourishment to sustain their lives. There are life-force vampires who must drink your essence to survive, though they're the rarest among vampires. Then there are the emotional/psychic vampires who feed off strong emotions and thoughts as their energy. Wherever they can find a lot of emotions bubbling over, there you'll find that type. Then there are the best known vampires like myself -- the bloodsuckers." Owain paused to sip his juice before continuing his explanation. "However, beyond the feeding they must do to sustain their life force, they eat and drink just like any other person on the planet. There are even things that can make a vampire ill, though most diseases and germs have little effect upon them."

"So, are they undead, soulless, like people claim, or is it something genetic that makes them different from people like me?" Her auburn eyebrows drew together when she paused. Forgetting that he was there, she started tracing patterns on the pale yellow table for a moment. Her questions, though basic, showed him just how much she wanted to know about vampires, even if it was for her own protection. Then she looked up at him. "If there is a genetic component that produces the transformation, then there's the possibility if someone is infected by a vampire and dies, it actually might be that they're not dead, but shifting from human to vampire, right? That could be the source of the rising from the dead legends that are often associated with vampires throughout the world."

"That's the question of the moment. I can tell you what I know based on my research."

Colette nodded. "The more I know, the better prepared I am how to handle vampires and other creatures, Owain. As long as you don't go off the spectrum or into the subfield of DNA splicing or genetic manipulation to change characteristics, I should be able to follow right along with you. It's one of those things I don't deal with beyond trying to get egg and sperm together."

He stood up and moved toward the stove, checking on the meal, stirring it while sorting out his thoughts. Finally, he figured out how to explain the main portion of his research. "Just like there are chromosomal and genetic anomalies like Down Syndrome, cleft lip, Turner Syndrome, certain forms of muscular dystrophy, and other defects that have been found during DNA research, I think that vampirism is similar in nature. In some ways vampirism acts like retroviruses that rewrite DNA sequences within certain cells, propagating further sickness. In this case, it rewrites the genetic code from human to that of vampire. Though I think I've isolated where on the genetic markers that vampirism can be found, there are some things I still don't know -- does the type of vampire that sires you determine what you transform into; what in the saliva of a vampire produces the change in humans; and how come not everyone bitten by vampires change into vampires."

Colette pursed her lips while she looked past him. The slightly glazed look in her eyes had him worrying that he had bored her with what he had told her. Then she shifted in her chair. "So, once you've isolated not only the DNA sequence, the trigger, and how the trigger starts the sequence, you're hoping to find a way to reverse the process, thus reverting vampire to human?"

"Yes, basically," he answered, opening the cabinet to the right of the stove. He removed two plates, then uncovered the pan as steam poured out toward him. Inhaling, the fragrant aroma filled his nostrils and his stomach growled to be fed. Quickly, he took a ladle-shaped spoon and used it to scoop the meal onto both plates. He grabbed silverware then carried both plates to the table before continuing. "I hope you like it; it's a family recipe. Anyway, as I was saying, that's basically what my goals are on this project. Plus, I have other questions about vampirism that I'm trying to answer. One question is whether or not vampirism is an evolutionary step for mankind or is it a mutation that shouldn't have survived past a certain time period in our history? Did the gods create vampirism and other preternatural creatures for whatever reasons and thus these people aren't human, but something else, even if they begin as humans? It's why I can't do the genetic research only, but have to also get to the root of where vampirism originated and why it still exists."

She swallowed a bite of her food, then sipped her drink. "I've got to admit that you've got me intrigued to know more, but I still would like some time to think about it. It's a big jump to put aside my goals for the last few months to go from Helsinger to Vampire Researcher."

Owain laughed and covered Colette's hand with his own. "Well, not quite. I still take out rogue vampires that have repeatedly broken the laws, just as I take out any preternatural if they break the laws protecting them and mankind. But the thing you have to realize is that for every bad vampire you've killed, there are as many law-abiding vamps who only want to coexist peacefully with mankind."

"You mean they're not all out to rule the world à la the Blade movies?" She laughed lightly and the joyous sound caressed his soul. Her laughter was something he'd want to hear time and again as it lightened his soul.

"Not even close, Col. The ones I know well just want to be accepted and live peacefully in the world. They want mankind to accept that they're biologically different, which doesn't equate with being evil. It's just like the difference between Homo sapiens and Neanderthal -- enough to make a difference but with so much in common, there shouldn't be an issue of living in harmony." Owain sighed as he speared a carrot on his plate and lifted it toward his mouth. "But before you say it, yes, there are some vampires who'd like nothing more than to rule over mankind and other vampires. That's why we have the laws and those who punish the lawbreakers."

"So what you're saying is that not all vampires are bad, just like not all humans are." She slid the last bite into her mouth.

“Exactly, Col. I’m glad you see that point, even if many others don’t.” The ticking sound of the battery-operated clock that hung near the back door of his home caught his attention. Seeing the hour, Owain groaned tiredly. “I’m done eating, and it’s way past my bedtime. We both need some sleep after everything we’ve gone through. Sunrise will be here in less than three hours.”

“I thought you vampires weren’t really affected by the whole sunrise thing,” Colette teased while leaning back in her chair.

“We’re not, that’s one of those myths like the rising from the dead thing. But I’ve been up for close to twenty-four hours already. I desperately need some sleep so I can function when I need to get up and check on the experiment downstairs.” Owain picked up their empty plates and glasses, placing them in the sink to wash them in the morning. Then he quickly transferred the leftover meal into a sealable container, placing it in the refrigerator. “I’ll take you to your room, then switch on the security alarms so we’ll know if anyone tries to enter the house.”

* * * * *

Colette followed Owain while he checked all the doors and windows, locking up and turning on the various security systems before escorting her to her room. Watching his long-legged stride as he led her down the hallway, she inhaled deeply, amazed at the depth of her desire for him. Never before had she experienced this type of sensation, but she wasn’t going to turn her back on it, even if she never thought that she’d want a vampire in her bed after losing her family. There was something about Owain that she found irresistible and even if it was related to breaking the curse that ruled his existence, Colette discovered that it didn’t bother her like it had with Niam.

Maybe her acceptance had been in the making since the moment she had met Niam and Davyd. Or it went deeper, perhaps in knowing that this man served the same goddess she did, even if he and his family broke a sacred oath at one time. Since then, they’d done everything asked of them and more, from what she saw during that brief time at Niam’s home. No matter the reasoning, Colette knew that if she worked with him that she’d have him in her bed as well as in her personal life. At one point in her life, she had wanted to get back into pure research to find a cure for infertility and perhaps helping Owain would help her make that dream come true if she couldn’t go home and reopen her practice in Florida.

Owain opened the door to her room allowing her to enter first, and she knew that once she was safe in her room, Owain would go to his and climb into his bed all alone. Emotion flooded her, and she knew that she couldn’t be alone tonight. She needed him to stay with her so the nightmares that had plagued her for months would stay away. There had to be a way to get him to stay the night with her. Before he could move past her as she stood in the doorway, she shifted positions, placing her hands on either side of his body, pinning him against the door.

“Yes?” The single word question slid from him as their gazes locked.

Colette said nothing, sliding her hands up under his shirt, slowly lifting it up she stood on her tiptoes. Her lips gently caressed his before pulling away. Her fingernails lightly raked over his nipples. A growl emerged from his throat while his dark eyes followed her movement as she slid her free hand down his body.

“What do you want, Col?”

“Don’t talk, don’t ask questions. Just feel and enjoy.” Her mouth trailed down his jaw while she tugged his shirt off. His chest fully exposed to her gaze, Colette kissed down from the base of his neck, stopping to suckle on one brown, flat nipple. When Owain moaned, his body pressing against hers, she slid her mouth to the other one, repeating the teasing process. Once his nipples were fully aroused, she plucked at them with her fingers before kissing each one.

Deftly, she leaned back and removed her shirt and bra in one swift movement, tossing the clothing somewhere in the room. Pressing herself against his warm chest, she slowly glided up and down, her taut nipples teasing across his skin. Then she started again on his nipples, teasing them until Owain squirmed beneath her.

Owain moaned as he placed his hands on her shoulders. Smiling, Colette lapped her tongue further down his chest, enjoying the sound of his heart racing at her touch. When she reached the waistband of his sweatpants, Colette yanked them downward, pleased to see that he hadn’t put on any underwear as his cock sprang to life before her. Claspings Owain’s erect cock with both hands, she slid her mouth over the crown of the bulbous head. Her tongue flicked against the tip, teasing it, while her mouth sucked and her hands stroked up and down his length.

“Col, stop, please.”

Her mouth barely lifted from his cock and she whispered, “Why? I want to pleasure you.” Their gazes met and she lifted her head slightly higher, making sure that he saw just how erotic it looked with her poised over his thick cock. “You want this as much as I do. Why resist?”

“Because we both know what’ll happen. Plus, we both need our sleep.”

“Yeah, and we both know that if we indulge, we’ll sleep even better than if we don’t have hot sex, Owain.” She winked, then slipped her lips over the bulbous tip and continued going down on him, until she couldn’t take him any deeper in her throat. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the taste of this man before her. The hint of male, musk and the scent of desire filled her nostrils, the intoxicating aroma elevating her own lust. Easing herself up his shaft, she stopped and swirled her tongue around it, teasing Owain. His hands shifted up her shoulders toward her face.

“You’re going to kill me before I find a damn cure, woman,” he groaned as his fingers fisted in her hair, urging her onward to take him faster. “I can’t believe you’re this insatiable.”

“I can’t believe you think you’re not.”

Her mouth returned to licking, sucking, and sliding him in and out slowly, the sexual tension rising with each stroke. She licked it; her teeth teased it with small nipping bites as she slid up and down. His heavy panting turned her on like nothing she’d ever experienced before. With a slight hum, she took him as deep as possible while cupping his balls, massaging them lightly.

When he lost control, she sensed it as his body stiffened beneath her. Tugging on her hair, Owain forced her to stand up, then guided her into the room. “Bed. Now,” he panted as he undressed her once they were at the edge of the bed. Once the rest of her clothes joined the piles on the floor, Owain forced her back onto the bed as his mouth dipped to one puckered nipple and his other hand teased the other.

“Yes, Owain, yes,” she moaned back before his mouth covered the other nipple, returning the teasing that she had done to him earlier.

His warm body covered hers and still she felt his heartbeat as he continued pleasuring her breasts. There was something about this man that excited her more than any other man she’d been with before. She wasn’t sure if it was how he rasped her nipples with his incisors, then with his tongue, or if it had something to do with how he made sure she was satisfied before climaxing himself. Even though she barely knew him, in the ways of physical pleasure she knew him almost better than she knew herself. Suddenly she knew nothing when a couple of his fingers thrust deeply into her pussy.

Arching into him, she moved in time with his questing, seeking fingers that slid in and out while she encouraged him to thrust deeper. She whimpered when overwhelming tingling desire pooled just past where his fingers stroked her pussy. “Owain, please,” she begged while she lifted her hips against his hand.

“Please what, Col?” His husky voice whispered in her ear before he kissed the side of her neck.

“Fuck me.”

“With pleasure.” He shifted until he was above her. His hand guided his cock to her wet entrance, and he slowly shifted his hips, forcing his thick cock deep into her pussy. “Oh, love, you feel so damn good around my cock.”

When he withdrew, Colette arched her back urging him to return. Owain flexed his hips, and she matched him each time, then wrapped her legs around his waist. As the precipice of climax loomed before her, she stroked his cheek and whispered in Gaelic, “*Tá tú pléisiúr.*”

“As you are my pleasure,” Owain answered, his eyes reflecting the emotions she knew he saw in her eyes. “Come with me.”

Colette let herself go, allowing him to catch her as they both plummeted in release. After a couple of minutes, she squirmed beneath Owain, having caught her breath and

needing a more comfortable position to sleep in. “Move over a bit, I can’t breathe if you crush me.”

He complied with a knowing male grin. Resting her head on his chest, she smiled at him, and though her breathing was normal, her heart still raced. “I think we’re both ready for bed now.”

“You think?” He stifled a yawn. “Where did you learn to speak Irish Gaelic?”

“Riana, one of my best friends in the world, taught me as she did all in our *nemeton*. Why?”

“I love how you give it your own unique twist,” he chuckled. “It’s definitely unforgettable.”

She smacked him, and he laughed harder. “You mean my American accent, don’t you?” She raised her hand to hit him again, but his hands grabbed her, lifting her so that they were eye-to-eye. His mouth brushed hers teasingly.

“But, of course, I mean your lovely accent. Not many people learn Gaelic, as it’s hard on the throat, and I’m proud that you did.” He kissed the tip of her nose, then slowly lowered her so that her head once again rested against his chest. “*Oiche mhaith*, Col.” His eyes closed, while his right hand stroked her back lightly.

“Sleep well too, O.” Colette closed her eyes; her body relaxing as sleep quickly claimed her.

Chapter Four

The opening sequence to *Sandman* by Metallica played loudly, waking up Colette from a deep sleep. Slightly disoriented to find herself on her side and no man next to her, Colette shifted positions on the bed, reaching for the pack that contained the offending piece of electronics. As the vibrating piece of metal and plastic touched the tips of her fingers, Colette grabbed it and pulled it free. Flipping it open, she punched a button then held the phone to her ear as crankiness flooded her body. “Unless you’re calling to tell me that I’ve inherited millions of dollars and don’t need to work or worry about anything, you’re not wanted. What the hell do you want at this ungodly hour of the morning?”

Laughter greeted her rudeness and Colette recognized the laugh as she lay back on the bed.

“Nice way to greet your soul sister. And for your personal information, it’s not an ungodly hour of the morning, considering it’s almost one in the afternoon in Egypt,” quipped Riana Sinclair, Colette’s best friend. “Let me guess -- you got laid, so it’s way too early to be waking up.”

Colette yawned into the phone. “Love you too, Sis. Why are you calling?”

“I’m going to be underground for a while.” Something in Riana’s tone broke through the tiredness in Colette’s brain.

“What?” She sat up and rubbed at her eyes with her free hand. “Riana Sinclair, what the hell is going on?”

“I’m on a quest and things are getting rough and there are innocents to consider. I’m fine though, unlike other times in the past. I left a message for Kirstie, since she didn’t pick up the phone when I called her.” There was a slight pause and Colette wondered what Riana was thinking and why the need to go underground, out of sight of everyone. “Her wedding was fantastic, wasn’t it?”

Going underground was a last-ditch thing that was only done if the danger couldn't be deflated any other way. Colette scrubbed at her face with her free hand, the last dregs of sleep leaving her. "Don't change the subject, though I shouldn't be surprised you attended and neither I nor Kirstie recognized you. What's the quest and why are you and others in danger?" Colette looked to her side and noticed Owain wasn't hanging around the door, which right now was a good thing. She wanted to have privacy as she dealt with this situation. Sometimes only being a pushy, foul-mouthed best friend brought out the truth when Riana closed up.

"I've been asked to excavate a known Celtic area for a couple of artifacts." Something in Riana's voice told her that wasn't all of the story.

"And?" Colette asked. Growling, she continued. "Ri, don't hold back. I'm on a case myself, but dammit, I need to know in case anything happens. You know the deal. I'm not your second for nothing. We need to know how to get to you if things go bad. Eye will have a shit fit if something happens to you."

"*Tá a fhios agam*, I know."

Riana paused again, this time longer and Colette heard some background noise. It sounded like Riana was at her desk, looking for the paperwork. This meant she hadn't left her home yet. *Good. If I can stall her, perhaps there was a chance of having someone from the nemeton reach her and accompany her on this quest of hers.*

"Where are you headed exactly?"

"I'm going to a little known site in Belgium. Then after that, I'll be heading to Dublin for a week," Riana answered, her voice tight but calm. "You can contact Eileen for any more information. She's got my underground schedule."

"I see. Why aren't you taking her along? Or at least one of the *nemeton*?"

"Too risky. The Belgian government issued me a special, limited-time permit for this site. There's no time to wait for further backup, especially as there's something there that must never be catalogued by them."

Colette sighed as realization hit -- Riana was recovering an artifact of power, one that needed to stay out of government hands. "Something of Morrighu's?"

"Give the sexpot a cock, she got it right!"

"Fuck you, sistermine."

"Um, we both know I don't swing that way, but thanks for the offer. You'd be tempting," Riana chuckled. "How are things in Cairo? Did you complete your personal quest? Do you need some help?"

Knowing what was being asked, Colette smiled softly. Riana would tell the Belgian government to fuck itself if Colette needed her. Though Riana didn't speak often on the preternatural world, they had worked with various groups at one time or another. As each person in the *nemeton* grove took on new responsibilities, Riana had warned them about the

various laws safeguarding mankind and how to protect themselves from an attack. Now Riana offered to come help her, even if it meant putting both of them at risk. Colette shook her head and replied, smiling, "It's been taken care of. I'm working with someone on a research project that bridges both history and genetics."

"Hmm, sounds intriguing. Anything in particular that this covers or is that classified information?"

"History of vampirism and the genetic components that produce it," Colette answered swiftly. She didn't want Riana interested too much or she'd get a call saying Riana had arrived at the airport and to pick her up.

"If you're tracing the origins of all vampires, including the anomalies, you'll need to stop at the Cairo Museum, then head to Ireland before flying to Mexico. Those places should provide the most information if you've already got the basics, including the old wives' tales, et cetera."

"What?" Colette looked at her phone then rubbed her ears, thinking she had misheard Riana. There's no way in hell it could be this easy. Information rarely ever dropped into a researcher's lap this easy. "What do you mean go to Ireland and Mexico after a stop at the Cairo Museum? Considering that you don't often discuss vampires, how the hell do you know anything about their origins?"

"I do research and I read a lot, remember?" Riana chided before chuckling. "I know you're a Helsinger, Sis, and what you do where the mortal and preternatural worlds collide. I personally know the heads of house among the European vampires, though not as many in the United States or in South America. Most importantly, it's one of those required things for Morrighu's High Priestess to know as she deals with mortal, immortal, and preternatural people."

Spotting a small pad of paper and a pen on the nightstand next to the bed, Colette grabbed both. Clicking the pen so it'd write, Colette asked, "Can you repeat where to search and who to contact if there is anyone in particular?"

"At the Cairo Museum, ask for Ola Mahdi. She's not only a friend of ours, she's also a vampire. Considering her knowledge as a historian, you'll find that she knows most of the legends concerning vampirism."

Colette paused in her writing, shock coating her words. "Ola is a vampire? How the hell did I miss that? Ola, a vampire. Damn."

Riana laughed before answering. "You didn't recognize the signs or deluded yourself that she couldn't be anything more than human because that's all you'd acknowledge at that point in your life. Take a minute and picture Ola in your mind. Remember her as you last saw her, then look closely at your memory."

Picturing the Egyptian woman with long black hair and almond brown eyes, Colette realized that Ola's skin often seemed paler at various times, then darker at others. Plus, there was how she often ordered her meat -- as raw as possible. The little things that made Ola

eccentric for Colette initially now told a different story. “Dammit, I can’t believe I never realized it until you said something.”

“When you consider her patron goddess and the ones she serves, it’s quite clear. Give her a call and ask her to talk to you regarding her knowledge of vampires. Ola’s the only one I know that has a complete history of preternaturals in Egypt and their creation.”

Colette marked the information down, including a phone number that Riana rattled off the top of her head. When Riana stopped, Colette asked about the next place. “And in Ireland?”

“Eileen can meet you in Dublin with all of the known information we possess and escort you to the sacred area of the vampires in Ireland. Your research partner won’t be able to accompany you since the people holding the information trust me, thus as my second, trust you. So, if you think your research partner minds being left behind, I’ll just have Eileen deliver copies of our personal files to you both.”

Colette chuckled in disbelief as Riana spoke matter-of-factly. “Why don’t you tell me since it seems as if you know everything about how vampires originated. It’d save time and we can move onto the next portion of our research if you possess everything we need.”

“Actually, no, I don’t know everything when it comes to vampires. I just know enough to get you past the usual dead ends that most researchers run into when doing this type of research,” Riana countered, her voice shifting into a harsher tone. “I don’t know the specifics, just basic facts, information collected over centuries and kept by other High Priestesses, and my own private library research. It might be more than most people are aware of existing, but it’s not unattainable, if you know who to contact and where to look.”

Colette threw the pad and pen to one side and hit one of the pillows on the bed a couple of times in frustration. Then she picked up the paper and pen again. “Sometimes Riana, I want to wring your neck. Why haven’t you told anyone about this?”

“Why didn’t anyone ask me?” The tone said plainly that if people didn’t utilize every possible resource then it wasn’t Riana’s fault if they failed. “It’s not like I hide information from people. They just need to ask for it.”

Sighing, Colette wrote a note to call Eileen and get the information. “Next place?”

“Mexico. This is harder, as one of my contacts died a couple of weeks ago.” A hitch in Riana’s voice told Colette that this contact was someone important to Riana.

“Who died?”

“Dr. Antonio Medallano. One of the best historians regarding Mayan and Incan history has passed away, becoming the butterfly hero of Mayan mythology.”

Colette paused, trying to take it in. She knew Dr. Medallano well and had done a few research projects in times past with him. It wasn’t possible; he couldn’t be dead. “Tony is gone?”

"Yes. He was found near Chichen Itza, murdered. The law officials think that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and was killed for money. However, I think he was silenced because of the information he had found -- information that you're now searching for." Riana's voice shook with anger and regret. "His wife, Cicely, has his notes and anything else of Tony's you might need. The original plan was for her to send me his things once I returned from this Belgian trip. But if you're going to end up going to Mexico, then you can collect them, using them for your research until I return."

Though she heard what Riana said, only one thing repeated in her mind -- Dr. Medallano was dead, murdered by persons unknown. "He's really dead? Injuries consistent with a vampire attack?"

"Yes." The word sounded harsh to Colette's ears and she knew why. Riana and Tony had been friends for the longest time, having met while in college. She was the godmother of his twin boys, whom she spoiled at every opportunity. They had shared their beliefs and magickal training as well. They were bound by blood and soul, uniting them as brother and sister. This loss had to be tearing Riana apart inside when there wasn't anything she could do with the Belgian government acting up at this moment. *I can't believe she didn't tell me before this. Then again, I've been single-minded in my pursuit. I don't know if I'd have heard her even if she had told me when she found out originally.* "I'm sorry, Sis. I know his death is a blow to you."

"Yes, it is, and I hate that he's gone. But if you find Tony's killer while on your research mission, you have my blessing to revenge his death on my behalf. I ask this of you -- for me, for Tony." Sniffles came through on the line. Riana was trying not to cry and Colette wished she could hug her best friend and ease the loss.

"Done. If I find the murderer, I will avenge Tony on your behalf as his blood sister." Colette paused, wanting to make sure Riana was okay, but knowing how her friend would reply. Finally she asked, "Are you going to be okay? It can't be easy dealing with all this at once, Riana."

"I'm always okay. You know that. Don't worry about me; just take care of yourself while you're traveling. I'll call you in two days, like always, unless something happens. Then if you don't hear from me, contact Eye for all communication."

Colette sighed, hoping that it wouldn't go that far once Riana liberated the artifact and had it disappear before anyone else noticed. "Okay, you don't want to admit that you're upset and that you'll continue on, just like always." Trying to think of anything else that she needed, Colette drew a blank. "Tell Eileen to get those notes together for me ASAP. I've got to figure out how to tell Owain about this without denting his ego that your resources outdo his."

"Owain?" Riana pounced on the name and Colette could kick herself for revealing who she was working with. "He was the missing brother from the wedding, right?"

“Yes.” Hopefully the short response would warn Riana from asking too much or reading too much into things this early. The last thing she needed was Riana telling her what to do.

Riana’s sudden chuckle surprised Colette into a grin. Perhaps Riana would leave well enough alone. One could always hope she would, though it rarely happened.

“I see. First Kirstie, and now you are involved with vampires and having hot, kinky sex with them. Sheesh, what is it with my *nemeton* being sucked in by vampires?”

“Oh, funny, Sis. Funny.” Shaking her head at Riana’s pun, Colette moved to the side of the bed. It was time to get moving, and she was already behind by many hours. “Okay, anything else I need to know?”

“Nothing offhand that I can think of. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine as I’ll be taking the usual precautions while there.” Colette heard Riana inhale deeply then exhale. There was more to come, and Riana would find some way to make her feel like a kid. Just as she thought perhaps Riana wasn’t going to say anything else, the woman continued. “Make use of the *nemeton* if you need to, even if it’s for protection or to be hidden from others. Stay safe and remember if you get killed, I will bring you back somehow and beat the fuck out of you, got it?”

“Yes, mom. Sheesh. You’d think I’m not trained to protect myself.”

“Well, this isn’t going to be easy for you. There is a lot of resistance to this knowledge being brought to light, Col. Some people take very nasty ways to keep things a secret at times. Sis, just be careful, okay?”

“*Mionnaigh mé.*” There wasn’t anything else to say to Riana’s request.

“Good, I’m holding you to your promise. Talk at you in two days.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too, Sis.” Colette hung up and placed the phone on the nightstand. Stretching, she allowed the information to filter through her mind. Somehow, it shouldn’t surprise her that her soul sister would know of this stuff and take it in stride.

First things first, though. She needed a shower, clothes, and then to find the hot vampire to relay the news. Once that was done, they could make their way to Cairo Museum. Satisfied with her plan of action, she scurried to the shower.

* * * * *

“*Deárthair,* what have you learned?” Owain sat at his computer with the web cam turned on. It wasn’t their weekly meeting, but sometimes a bunch of his brothers found themselves online and chatted, sharing important information not to mention teasing each other over anything embarrassing.

“Besides that you’re a pain in the ass? Not much. I do know that the torc and Colette are meant for you.” Niam grinned broadly and Owain returned the smile. “We missed you at

the wedding. Perhaps when things are settled, you'll come for a holiday. I know that Kirstie would love to see you."

"I might at that." Images of the lovemaking he had had with Colette burst into his mind. He needed some guidance, even if he doubted the truth in the curse being lifted for him next. "I put the torc on Colette. Later I said the words, and it glowed in response."

"See, I told you that she's your *anamchara* ..."

"But if she doesn't love me unconditionally --"

Niam shook his head then sighed heavily. "*Tá a fhios agam, mo dheartháir*. What are your plans?"

"I'm waiting for some follow-up information from a *cúntóir*. Then, I'll know where to head next in this project." Owain smiled. "Colette's agreed to help me with my research."

"Good. You need someone able to keep up with you as you continue this project. Other than the research project, how are you?"

Owain debated whether to tell the truth, but decided that Niam would know anyway. Very rarely could he hide anything from his fraternal twin brother. "Very good, considering last night."

Niam's brow rose then lowered. "I don't wanna know. I don't. Kirstie sends her love to Colette. You're to tell her so, and you're to be a good vampire and not bite Colette."

"Well, damn, ruin my fun." Then he paused. "Uh, she might be a bit late on that warning."

"Owain --"

"I've shared the passion with her, but I've not exchanged blood with her. I won't do that unless it's something she desires, Niam." Owain heard a noise above him. "She's up. I'll let you go. Once I know where we're headed, I'll give you or Miach a heads-up."

"Keep her safe. Miach will have your head otherwise."

"He doesn't like cocks."

"I'm not going to tell Casper you said that." Niam's eyes sparkled in mischief. "But I might tell Micheal Padraig."

"Go for it. I'm not afraid of our older *deartháir*."

"Keep safe and hopefully you'll find the answers to your questions, Owain."

"Enjoy the married life with your wife. We want nieces and nephews. Lots of them."

"I'll have to go and try again." Niam grinned wickedly. "It's a hardship, but I'm man enough for the task."

"Talk to you later." With that, Owain shut off the web cam and logged out of the Marauder system. "Time to see what Colette is up to now that she's finally woken up."

Climbing up the stairs, he could hear her in the kitchen making something to eat. He had been up for a couple of hours and had already taken care of his vampiric needs. The scent of onions, peppers, and something else being browned caused his stomach to grumble.

"I see you've finally gotten up," Owain said as he stepped behind her, kissing the back of her neck. Her scent teased his nostrils. "What are you making?"

"Not quite sure, probably fajitas. You have all the makings. I'm going to add the steak slices, then while it cooks, the tortillas need to be warmed up."

"I'll do that. Did you sleep well?"

"Very much, thanks. And you?"

"I slept enough."

Colette looked at him. "My best friend called me this morning and gave me some information regarding some places to look for research. We have a three o'clock appointment to see Dr. Ola Mahdi at Cairo Museum."

"Oh?" Owain's brow lifted. He wasn't sure he liked that someone else knew of the research project. "What all did you tell your best friend?"

"She's my soul sister. I told her I was with you, she knows about Niam and Kirstie. She's part of my nemeton."

"I see."

"I told her I was looking into the history of vampires. I didn't tell her why or what about it. She gave me some references." Colette explained more about what Riana had shared. "See, she doesn't know why we're doing this, just that we're looking into the history."

"Dr. Medallano is dead?" Owain swore softly. "He was a good man."

"You knew him?"

"He was a good friend to the family." Seeing the expression on her face, he continued. "No, he didn't know what we are. Tony knew my brothers Miach and Elathan best. They move in various history circles together."

"Then they'd know my sister, Dr. Riana Sinclair."

"She's your best friend?" Owain asked in shock.

"Yes, why?"

"That woman comes close to opening up problems when it comes to the ancient Celts." Owain growled. "There are some things that are not meant to be taught in today's society."

"Why not? How can we learn to avoid the mistakes of old if we don't know what happened?" Colette placed the fajita mixture in a bowl and placed it on the table where the condiments waited. Then she sat, drink in hand as Owain brought over the warmed tortillas.

"It's not that simple."

"It's not that hard. Listen to me, Owain. Riana isn't exposing anything more than she needs to. Whether you or your brothers like it or not, she's doing her job as a historian."

"But she could accidentally expose us."

"She hasn't yet. And she's going to be out of circulation for a while."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Now, eat up. We're going to have to leave in a bit. Cairo traffic is not easy to deal with as I've found out the past couple of weeks."

They ate in relative silence while speculating on the information that Dr. Mahdi had in her possession. Owain found himself enjoying brainstorming with Colette. She had a quick mind that comprehended various aspects the others in his family just didn't get. It made a nice change of pace not having to explain everything.

Within a half hour, they were on their way to Cairo Museum. What was a vampire doing working for the Egyptian museum? He had no clue, but he was hoping that she'd be able to shed some light on the history of vampires.

* * * * *

They were escorted past many of the ancient artifacts to where Dr. Mahdi was currently overseeing the restoration of a small statue in a back room.

"*Is salaam 'alaykum*. Welcome to Cairo Museum," the young looking woman said, spotting the two of them as they approached. "*Ey rayyik fee da timsaal?*" Her hands pointed to the statue of a royal nobleman.

"*Ana baHibb*," Owain answered in fluent Egyptian Arabic. "I like the statue. Can I take it home with me?"

Ola and Colette laughed while the workers snickered. Ola answered Owain, making sure that there was no doubt to the answer. "*Aasifa, ma'adarsh*. No, you can't, or we'll have to kill you."

"Well, damn, ruin my need to possess something of ancient Egypt." Owain responded, taking Dr. Mahdi's hand, kissing it lightly before letting go of it. "Thank you for seeing us when I know you don't often have free time in your schedule."

Ola smiled at Owain then at Colette. "I'm glad that you managed to catch me when you did. What can I do for you both?"

Colette stepped nearer Ola and dropped her voice slightly. "Riana sent me for some answers to questions we have regarding origins of certain groups."

Ola nodded, comprehension crossing her face. "Understood. Come, I'll take you somewhere we can speak privately. Follow me." She added some instruction in Arabic to the conservators in the room, then brought Owain and Colette to the back area of the museum where her office was located. "It's not much, but it is private."

Colette hugged the Egyptian woman again before they sat down in the chairs that Ola pointed out. "Thanks, Ola. I've not seen you in a long time."

"Five years, I think, Colette. How are you?"

"I'm fine, but you've not aged a day, while I look like an old fogey." They both chuckled, and Owain shook his head, denying Colette's claim. "I think she looks fabulous, but I know, I'm male and don't count."

"Not true, you look beautiful," Ola stated as she shut the door. "What information do I have that you need?"

Colette explained briefly about the search without revealing the other aspects, like the genetic research. "So, can you shed any light on this? I know the ancient Egyptians had their own beliefs, but I don't know if there were any vampires in the mythology."

Ola sat back in the leather chair behind her desk, a broad grin crossing her face. "Well, there are the known myths and the unknown myths."

Colette and Owain shared a glance, and they both shrugged then turned their attention toward Ola once more.

"The story of Sekhmet, you mean?" Owain asked. "I've been reading that and trying to trace the earliest references to the story."

"What are you both talking about?" Colette looked at them both with a slightly confused gaze. Egyptian mythology wasn't her strongest suit, and she wasn't sure how Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of medicine had anything to deal with vampires.

Ola gestured toward the small statue of Sekhmet on her desk. "Let me tell you the story of Sekhmet and Ra. In it you'll hear what is considered by some to be the beginning of vampirism in ancient Egypt."

Nodding, Colette sat back. "I'm not as fluent in other culture's myths as I am about the Celts."

"Ah, but our friend Riana knows them all. She's truly a goddess in her own right."

"Don't tell her that. She'll be unbearable to live with."

They laughed while Owain looked slightly pensive. "Don't send any ill will toward Dr. Sinclair. She's truly a wonderful woman and one I trust with my sacred secrets," Ola stated softly.

After everyone was ready, the Egyptian historian told the story of her patron and Ra.

"Ra, the father of all gods walked the earth as a man, ruling as the first Pharaoh. However, in time, Ra aged and those who once revered him began taunting him. Many times he forgave mankind until his anger was aroused to the breaking point. He called forth his children and demanded that they help sit in judgment of mankind, deciding their fate. They all said that Ra should turn his Eye upon them, seeking retribution, but who among his children should be sent as his representative?"

“Send against them the glance of your Eye in the form Sekhmet!” cried all the other gods and goddesses, bowing before Re until their foreheads touched the ground.

“Her chief delight was in slaughter, and her pleasure was in blood, so many of the gods said. So at the terrible glance from the Eye of Ra, his daughter Sekhmet came into being, the fiercest of all goddesses. At the bidding of Ra, she came into Upper and Lower Egypt to slay those who had scorned and disobeyed him. She killed them among the mountains, which lie on either side of the Nile, and down beside the river, and in the burning deserts. All whom she saw she slew, rejoicing in slaughter and the taste of blood.

“Presently, Ra looked out over the land and saw what Sekhmet had done. Then he called to her, saying: ‘Come, my daughter, and tell me how you have obeyed my commands.’

“Sekhmet answered with the terrible voice of a lioness as she tears apart her prey, ‘By the life which you have given me, I have indeed done vengeance on mankind, and my heart rejoices.’

“Now for many nights the Nile ran red with blood, and Sekhmet’s feet were red as she went here and there through all the land of Egypt, slaying all within her path. Presently, Ra looked out over the earth once more, and now his heart was stirred with pity for men, even though they had rebelled against him. But none could stop the cruel goddess Sekhmet, not even Ra himself. She must cease from slaying of her own accord -- and Ra saw that this could only come about through cunning.

“So he commanded his messengers to bring back the red ochre from Elephantine, seven thousand clay jars, and great amounts of the barley-beer brewed in Heliopolis, the city of Ra. When they had done that, Ra explained that they were to mix the ochre with the beer inside the jars. Once finished, the beer gleamed in the moonlight as if it were the blood of many men.

“Now take it to the place where Sekhmet proposes to slay men when the sun rises,” said Ra.

“And while it was still night the seven thousand jars of beer were taken and poured out over the fields so that the ground was covered to the depth of nine inches -- three times the measure of the palm of a man’s hand -- with the strong beer, which is also known as ‘sleepmaker.’

“When daylight arrived, Sekhmet the Terrible came also, licking her lips at the thought of the men whom she would slay. She found the place flooded and no living creature in sight; but she saw the beer that was the colour of blood, and she thought it was blood indeed -- the blood of those whom she had slain.

“Then she laughed with joy, and her laughter was like the roar of a lioness hungry for the kill. Thinking that it was indeed blood, she stooped and drank. Again and yet again she drank, laughing with delight; and the strength of the beer mounted to her brain, so that she could no longer slay.

“At last she came reeling back to where Ra waited; that day she had not killed even a single man.

“Then Ra said, ‘You come in peace, sweet one.’ And her name was changed to Hathor, and her nature was changed also to the sweetness of love and the strength of desire. And henceforth Hathor laid low men and women only with the great power of love. But forever after, her priestesses drank in her honour of the beer of Heliopolis coloured with the red ochre of Elephantine when they celebrated her festival each New Year. So mankind was saved, and Ra continued to rule, old though he was.”

Owain looked at Colette, realizing she wasn’t getting the shift between goddesses too well. “We know that Sekhmet continued to be because she’s also the patron deity of physicians. Hathor is yet another aspect that became a separate goddess in time.”

“*Na’am*. Yes, but this is one of the myths that speaks on the aspect of bloodletting as well as dealing with the warrior spirit of the lion goddess.” Ola made a sign with her fingers, one that Colette recognized from her time with Riana.

“You and Riana have given to Sekhmet, haven’t you?” The knowledge was clear in her head as if she had opened up the book and read it with complete understanding. “That’s how come you’re familiar with the vampire mythology of Egypt.”

“Beyond that tale, there’s very little dealing with vampirism. I, myself, became a vampire through my time serving as a priestess for Sekhmet. Only a rare few were chosen for the pleasure of war and retribution.” Her small smile was one of acceptance and Colette knew that her friend didn’t regret the transition at all. “Though it’s been a long time, I do not worry much over the fact that I have lived this long.”

“So, you keep tabs on the wrong people, I take it?” Owain asked. “*Galeb al Maw’t*?”

“Ah, you know the name by which her chosen go by, the Bringer of Death.” Her smile belied just how dangerous Ola truly was. Colette thanked the gods that this woman was on her side. “You and yours shall not be harmed. You serve another lady of the vampires, as do I.”

Owain blinked. “What do you mean?”

Colette nodded. “You mean Morrighu in one of her more bloody aspects.”

“Yes, Riana and I compared our goddesses, and we found much in common.” Ola answered. “Before you think of the whole idea of the generic pantheons and the stories being spread by travel, you have to understand the independent growth factor.”

“Oh, yes, trust me, I’m well versed in that. Riana makes sure all of us in the *nemeton* are well versed in the pantheons.”

“But how did the vampires come to be?” Owain’s voice was steady.

Ola didn’t speak, but went from her desk to a small square box that rested on a nearby table. Dialing the combination, she opened the safe and lifted out some glass-covered papyri.

Bringing them to the desk, she sat down. "This is something that's known only to those of us who serve Sekhmet."

Colette saw the papyri and wondered at the meaning of the hieroglyphs. Some of them looked vaguely familiar, but that was odd, since it wasn't a language she had tried learning. Riana read hieroglyphs and had tried to teach Colette, but she'd had more important things to do at the time. Now she was wishing she had listened and learned.

Owain pointed to a sequence on the papyri. "They met? The goddesses?"

"Yes. So it says. This papyrus is from the time of Cleopatra VII. She had over three hundred Celtic warriors hired to guard and protect her. They spent time speaking to the various priests in order to find a place to have their sacrifices."

"Is this the earliest ones you have in your keeping, *Sitt Hakim*?"

"Lady doctor? How quaint and how accurate on some levels." Ola pulled out another papyrus from under the top one. "This is one of the oldest we have. It deals with the myth in another light, that which is known only to the priests and priestesses."

Owain scanned through the document and muttered under his breath while Colette tried to understand it. Ola, noticing her difficulty, motioned to the side of the desk, allowing Owain full access to the papyrus.

"You're doing okay, Colette?"

"I wish I had learned to read hieroglyphs and demotic."

With laughter like silver rain, Ola smiled. "You don't need to. There's not much to it, unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you look at it."

Ola gestured to the chairs that Colette and Owain had vacated. "Let me tell you what the papyrus says and my own experience."

"Please. I get the idea that she's one of the first bloodsuckers, I mean -- vampires in history." Colette interspersed, blushing as she caught herself a moment too late.

Ola chuckled. "Not quite. That's where the problem lies. In the original text, she slaughters, reveling in the spilling of blood. In some of the other translations, it has her drinking the blood from the opponents instead of licking it like a lion does."

Colette nodded as she followed along. "Ah, so they took the feeding of blood, like a lion does to eventually mean to drink blood, à la Dracula style."

The Egyptian vampire continued her story as Colette watched Owain from the corner of her eye. "Exactly. Reality is, even among those of us who are vampires now in Sekhmet's service, we are as she is. We lap at the blood. Killing is done to exact retribution, not for the need of blood."

Owain interrupted, his finger tapping on the glass. "It says here that Sekhmet met the gods of other places and times. You mean the pantheons met?"

“Yes. That’s what they often kept quiet, except to those who serve in the priesthood. We knew there were other cultures and other gods, but the whole idea of supremacy, as you know, remains the cultures above the foreign gods.”

“So, we’ve got Sekhmet visiting other gods. Do you know who?”

“We surmise that it’d be the other blood gods.” Ola’s face took on a pensive look. “See, we were all blood drinkers until she came back. Then some of us began feeding in other ways, but always exacting retribution.”

The three of them were quiet as they considered the implications. Colette was the first to speak. “This would mean that the gods she met were vampiric in ideas, but not necessarily as blood drinkers.”

“I think you’re right, Col,” Owain stated, his face thoughtful. “If we consider Morrighu as one of the goddesses involved, she’d commit bloodshed, but she wouldn’t drink it. It was the emotion of warfare she loved most.”

“Yes,” Colette agreed, continuing her thoughts as they coalesced into a logical format. “She revels in the emotions caused by wars, battles, even arguments. It’s that whole discord and dissension thing.”

“How many gods do you think there were?” His question silenced them all for a moment as the question hung before them unanswered.

Ola spoke first, breaking the silence. “At least three. There might have been others, perhaps similar in nature, but at least three for the three types of vampires that walk this world.”

Colette rubbed her head. “If you kill others who break the law, even your own people, which would include vampires, why on earth did the Helsingers come into play?”

Ola and Owain exchanged looks. The Egyptian vampire priestess shrugged as if to say, “This is your field, not mine.” Colette looked from one to another.

“Okay, fess up, one of you. I want to know why and how the Helsingers got started.”

“How to start this,” Owain muttered, running his hands through his dark hair. “The Helsingers in a way started way before the Bram Stoker story came along. Originally, they were humans who worked in conjunction with one of the vampires who enforced the Vampiric Codex.”

“This is getting too Anne Rice for me,” Colette warned. “I don’t do Anne Rice.”

“Definitely not Anne Rice.” Owain looked at Ola and gestured helplessly. “This is hard to explain as the Helsingers started before my time.”

“True, so I guess I should explain then,” Ola responded. Before she could start, there was a knock at her closed office door. “Dr. Mahdi?”

Ola moved to the door, opening it partially. Egyptian Arabic flowed back and forth before Ola sighed in resignation. The Egyptian historian faced Colette and Owain and made

an apologetic gesture. "I must go back and watch over the workers. There's some difficulty and they've asked for my assistance."

"Thanks so much for the time you've given us, Ola. I'll let Riana know you're okay." Colette was grateful for the knowledge that Ola had willingly shared without asking any questions that would have been hard to answer.

"Please do stop by some other time and see me. I'd love a chance to see you both again. It's been too long, so let's not go another five years."

Colette and Ola embraced then Ola hugged Owain. She whispered something into his ear that Colette couldn't hear. He responded in Egyptian with a chuckle. "C'mon Col. It's about time we get us some food."

"Take care. May the gods smile upon your search."

They left the museum, noticing the crowds had gotten less intrusive. As they climbed in the car, Colette shot Owain a look.

"You were involved with her at one time, weren't you?"

"Huh?"

"You and her. You were an item once, right?"

Owain stopped and looked at Colette. "An item?"

"Let me put this succinctly then. You fucked her."

Owain sighed. "We'll talk when we get some food."

Chapter Five

The ride to the restaurant was quiet, damnably quiet in Colette's mind. Why it bothered her that Owain had slept with the Egyptian vampire wasn't sensible, but there it was. She was upset by it.

He broke the silence first. "It was one time, over three hundred years ago."

"What?" She looked at Owain as he parked the car in a small parking lot in a downtown area she didn't recognize from her tourist books.

"You heard me. I'm not going into details. That's all there is to it. She preferred my brother to me."

"Niam? I don't see why, you're much hotter --"

"No, not Niam. Miach."

Colette gaped in disbelief. "What? Him? The ghost?"

"Wraith, not ghost. Yes, him." Owain turned off the engine then turned to face her. "You are okay now with this?"

"I don't understand why you slept with her." She knew she sounded like a petulant child, but she couldn't help it. Ola had been a friend and the idea of Owain sleeping with a friend of hers just didn't sit well.

Owain sighed, his frustration evident as he slammed his hand down on the steering wheel. "It's a long story. It deals with a time when the choice was sleep with her or for both of us to be killed. Neither of us wanted to die. We both knew we had more to do, thus we took the only other alternative available to us."

"But then to choose the ghost -- I'm sorry, wraith -- over you? Was she nuts?" Colette shook her head. *Why would any woman give up this hot-blooded vampire for a ghost?*

“He has more power. Plus, at one time there was this spark between them.” Owain grinned. “Miach was a high priest, thus worthy of a high priestess. So, they got together, and I was set free to go on my way.” She rolled her eyes and he chuckled at her obvious refusal to understand why it had gone the way it had. “Afterward, she got to know that our dear brother could be an ass.”

“Miach? No ... you don’t say,” Colette teased.

“Now, if this is finally settled, let’s go eat. This place has some great cuisine, and I’m starved. We won’t have to worry about waiting too long since I know the owner.” Owain opened his car door, waiting for Colette. She exited the car from the passenger side and headed into the restaurant while he followed behind. She knew he was scanning for possible trouble, but she hadn’t seen any as she made her way to the restaurant’s front door.

Walking inside, the smells of roasted meat, fragrant herbs, and more assaulted their senses, making Colette’s mouth water in anticipation. A man that stood near the front door, spoke rapidly in Egyptian, herding them toward a small booth near a window. Owain sat with his back to the wall while Colette looked around her, making sure she scoped out the exit routes in case of an emergency. Once she was sure of the exits, she allowed herself to sit back and enjoy the ambiance.

“What is this place?” She was curious as she took in the brightly painted walls and the beautiful mosaics that outlined the windows. Everything about this place screamed that it wasn’t for just any person, but for a specific clientele.

“It’s a restaurant that caters to various types of people; people who don’t often have a safe place to relax and enjoy a nice hot meal.” Owain waved to a man who passed by them, and the man nodded his head in greeting but didn’t stop, continuing to his own table a few feet away.

“I see.” It became obvious as bowls of raw, bloody meat and crimson soup were served alongside popular Egyptian dishes that she’d become well acquainted with since her arrival a week ago. “I take it the people who run this place know you personally?”

“Something like that. Though not in the Ola personal way, I promise.” Owain smiled at her and she wanted to preen at how special he made her feel. “Trust me; the moment you walked in the door, they knew what you are and who you are. The meal will be enjoyable for us both.”

A young Egyptian man approached the table with two plates of steaming-hot food and two glasses of what looked like the juice she had drunk last night. Once he set the table, the young man bowed toward Owain, then to Colette.

Owain clasped the boy on the shoulder. “Sahim, it’s good to see you again. How is your mother?”

The dark-haired, dark-eyed youth smiled at Owain, trying to keep his hands at his sides. She sympathized with the young man, as she too gestured while talking. “She is very

well; thank you, Owain, sir. I have brought you your food, and mother told me to remind you that you cannot pay this time. She owes you for saving her life last month.”

Owain waved the boy’s words away. “No, she does not. It was my fault she was put in danger. Tell her I shall pay and that I’m sending my doctor friend to do a check up on you both as well. How is schooling going?”

The young man puffed up, showing Colette just how young he truly was. She smiled at him as he told Owain about his school. “My tutor is fantastic, Owain. I enjoy his teaching much. He prepares me for the changes that’ll come when I’m older. He said that with knowledge of how the world works, my skills, and what my inheritance is, I shall be able to bring my people forward. I won’t forget my duty, I promise.”

Owain ruffled the boy’s hair. “Just remember that when you don’t want to study anything but the cool stuff. The math, science, and grammar will help you more, as well as learning various languages, Sahim.”

“What do you wish to do when you grow up, Sahim?” She couldn’t sit quietly anymore and spoke up, yet kept her tone soft and encouraging. “My name is Colette. I’m a friend of Owain’s.”

“Miss Colette, I wish to lead my people to health. I shall be a doctor or a businessman in the health industry, thus able to supply low-cost medicines to help them heal. Only when people no longer worry over how to care for themselves when they’re sick and lack the money can they think about other important things.”

“That’s great, Sahim. I know you’ll succeed in all of your dreams.” Colette smiled at him as he blushed and scurried away. She turned her attention to Owain, who watched the young man scamper through the kitchen doors. “He seems like a great kid.”

“He is. His older brother was torn apart by a disease that runs rampant among his kind. I was too late to bring him any help, but in enough time to save his mother and Sahim.” Owain sipped his drink and sighed softly. “I pay for Sahim’s tutor and get regular reports.”

“He’s a shifter, right? I noticed his eyes had a hint of amber in them,” she said quietly, her tone lowering to match the muttering around them.

“Yes. As are his mother and brother. His father was a vampire. Sahim has some vampiric tendencies, but he’s more shifter in his DNA, and that will determine his dominating characteristics when he goes through puberty.”

Colette frowned. “How incompatible are the two DNA? Since they’re technically different species, wouldn’t it prevent cross-pregnancies?”

“They’re not all that different, genetically speaking. There’s a trigger in the last half of the DNA code for the shifters that accepts mutations like vampirism, wraiths, and the like. From what I’ve compared in both DNA markers, vampirism has the same trigger that allows for some characteristics that belong to other preternatural groups.”

“So, basically, they can multiply, though it’s not easy and depending on the recessive and dominant genes, it’s a toss-up who they take after?” Colette ate her food, enjoying the spicy flavours as they coated her tongue.

“For some reason, it seems that all the preternaturals can reproduce; though, as you point out, it’s not as easily accomplished as within their own species. When they mate with humans, however, there are higher incidences of miscarriages when the dominant genes are from the preternatural parent. It’s nature’s way of making sure that reproduction of the species only progresses as its needed, I guess.” Owain ate absentmindedly between sentences. “What makes it interesting is that from what’s been documented, you can be one type of vampire, and your progeny can be another, if two recessive genes are matched, which then subverts the dominant gene. I’ve yet to isolate the sequence involving vampires into what makes each different, so I’m not quite sure how vampires who are born become which type.”

Colette’s fork paused midway to her mouth. “What do you mean? That a blood drinker can reproduce an energy drinker? How is that even possible?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve torn apart the genetic markers that make up vampires, and I can’t find what causes it. Yet, there are multiple studies that have shown it occurring.”

Colette tapped her fork against her plate while thinking. “What about those who are made vampires? Do you have the shifts that occur in their DNA structure? We hadn’t gotten this far in our talks last night.”

Owain stabbed at a piece of meat on Colette’s plate and stuffed it in his mouth before answering. “Yes. There is the iron deficiency, the slightly pallid complexions in some due to the red blood cells not carrying enough oxygen. In the energy vampires, they become more distant, their hearing increases, mineral deficiencies develop, causing them to feed, and in the genetic code, it’s just a couple of markers, as you know.” He ate a few more bites of the food in front of him. Wiping his mouth, he looked at her. “Then there’s the emotion feeder. Usually it’s either happy or sad emotions they get the most from, but in turn it’s almost like they’re apathetic in emotions unless they’ve fed. Medically, they have a variation of the iron and mineral deficiency though.”

“Anything specific on the DNA chain though?” Colette sipped her juice as she gestured. “Sounds like most of these are symptoms of the problem. They’re not the cause of the variation but the determining factors helping to categorize them.”

Owain paused his eating to answer her question. “There’s an extra link on the chain that happens for each vampire, wraith, or shifter. Finding the link isn’t the problem, it’s figuring out how it’s activated. Plus, I’ve noticed that not all humans have that extra link that is apparent in vampires, both made and born. However, there are a significant number of humans who have that link, which means they might be predisposed to converting, I think.”

Colette’s fork hit the plate with a clatter. “What?” She paused. “Did I just hear you say that some people have the genetic tendency toward vampirism?”

“Yup. I know, it’s a pretty wild and shitty thing at the same time. We discovered it among the *cûntoír*, and over time collected samples of various humans when possible, testing them for the preternatural link.”

Suddenly, a large growl erupted to the right of them. Five men, ragged in dress and looks, but definitely vampire by their attitude, brushed by a shifter, knocking his food off the table. Ignoring him, they headed toward Owain and Colette.

Colette pushed back her chair and undid the sheath clip at her waist. “Friends of yours?”

“No, dear. Friends of yours. Recognize the marks on their arms? They’re the same as the dearly departed Hafid who broke the laws governing mortals and vampires.” Owain stood up and away from the table, his gaze directed at the five vampires. “What do you want?”

The leader of the five moved toward Owain as he gestured at Colette. “Give us the bitch and no one else has to die.”

Colette’s brow lifted, shifting to a more aggressive, defensive stance. “What have I done to you? Though I recognize your markings as being part of the Lightning Clan -- a clan that I’ve treated well and never went after -- I want to know why you have a problem with me.”

The tallest one with a pierced nose and a scar on his right cheek shifted so that he seemed to be moving closer toward her as he played with his switchblade in one hand. “You killed our friend, and we’re demanding payback. Stupid, vampire-killing bitch. You had no right to touch Hafid.”

Before she opened her mouth, Owain moved in front of the table, offering subtle but definite protection. “No, she didn’t kill that piece of shite. I did, twisting his neck until it snapped, then draining him dry and unable to save his own sorry arse.” Owain stopped and chuckled ironically. “Didn’t you see the marks on him? Or are you that fucking stupid you can’t figure out what another vampire’s marks are?”

The vampires stopped their unsubtle shuffling toward Colette and as one looked toward Owain. She wanted to cheer when Owain flashed his fangs at them, one of the better insults used between vampires before fighting. The third guy, big and burly, who stood behind the ringleader, spoke up. “He’s with the Helsinger. He’s a vampire like us and yet he’s hanging out with a Helsinger.”

A fourth man piped up. “No, he can’t be, man. Everyone knows that vampires and Helsingers don’t get along, so he must be seducing her so he can rid us of her foul stench.” The other vampires agreed loudly, and it took a good amount of restraint to keep Colette from whistling at them and telling them that he wasn’t going to kill her, but she was going to kill them for their idiocy so it wasn’t passed on to future generations. She shot Owain a look though as he glanced back at her. She mouthed, “Are you still sure that you and your brothers aren’t the only good vampires in the world?”

Owain grinned, then set his face in a slightly ticked-off look before turning back to the gang. He whistled loudly, breaking up the impromptu shit-talking.

"You're wrong on all counts, Lightning Clan." Colette waved at the members with her free hand as silence descended in the restaurant. Owain spoke again once he had their complete attention. "No, she's not going to be executed for your *strega* leader's death. He defied the ancient laws and refused to conform, even after others warned him and his first *strega*, you know, the one you all weren't good enough to be a part of." Owain slid his hands downward and as he raised them upward toward the vampires, Colette noticed that daggers were now in his hands. He continued, his voice ringing clear to everyone who remained in the restaurant. "She became Helsing to avenge her family's murder by those who broke mortal and vampiric laws. It was her right to destroy Hafid, and she granted me the kill as he caused harm to those I knew as well. Now, you have the same choice he did -- leave or die."

Colette moved behind him and placed her hand hard against his back, letting him know she was behind him, so they wouldn't fall over each other when the idiots decided to take the stupid way of leaving the restaurant. She hoped that they were smarter than they looked, but the low growling told her that they weren't and were willing to put innocents at risk.

"Let's roll," she growled as the five vampires spread out a bit, arranging themselves in the typical defense used by weaker, younger vampires. "The quicker we dispatch them, the less chance of anyone getting harmed if anyone is still left in here."

"Back down, she-man," Owain whispered back with a hint of humour. "We don't want a fight here. Not now, not here, not without backup."

"Fuck backup, let me take them out, we'll finish our meal --" She knew that Owain was right, but she knew that they could handle these five easily between them. Not only could she sense that they were vampires, but somehow, while testing them, their relative strength was revealed to her. "They're weak, haven't fed properly, and are the lowest level of vampires, Owain."

"And you'll be hunted from this moment on if you attack first. They're acting outside of Clan protocol, but if you touch them -- the Clan will back them up."

She looked at the vampires again, realizing that it was just as Owain had said, and that they knew just enough that they didn't dare begin the fight and wanted her to start it. "Shit. Stupid yet sly vampires -- exactly what I didn't ask for in my Yule stocking this year."

"They're not on my list either, so don't think of giving me any. Now behave and let me lead this."

"Fine, tough man. But remember that you're not always in charge."

"Yes, dear." He paused. "Heads up, I think desperation is setting in. They might attack anyway."

Shifting her weight slightly to the left, a clear view of all five vampires met her eyes. Colette concentrated on how each one moved, while trying to decide whether or not to risk death and punishment from their Clan. Davyd had taught her that watching their pre-battle motions would show her how a vampire fought, since many never learned proper fighting techniques, relying instead on their vampiric strength. With a flick of her wrist, the knife that sat in the wrist sheath was hilt first in her hand. Owain was right; a fight in the restaurant wouldn't help anyone, and it'd mark her among those in Egypt who despised Helsingers and what they represented. *Dammit, I should've known a place like this would result in something like this. Memo to self, kick O's ass for bringing me here.*

One of the vampires jumped over the table to Colette's left, his blade flashing in a downward arc, giving her just enough warning to crouch and come up with her fist. As her fist made contact against the vampire's face, she felt her blade slide between his ribs, hitting its mark. *One-two, just like Davyd said. Hit them to stun them, then ram the blade home, finishing them off for all time.* Following through the motion, she allowed him to fall to the floor as the blade came out of his chest, leaving her free and protected from another attack. Her eyes searched the next vampire out, and gestured toward the group. "Who wants to dance next? Don't be shy, now babies; I promise that your death will be swift."

Before she could do anything else, Owain spoke in an ancient tongue and a pale green glow surrounded his hands as he gestured toward the vampires. The spell effectively bound the remaining vampires from attacking. "I don't want you to die, you shites! If you want a piece of someone, try me for size, but be warned, I won't let you touch the Helsinger."

Colette knew that Owain couldn't maintain the binding spell for too long against four vampires, but she couldn't help him with it as it was a spell she was completely unfamiliar with as well. Instead, she once again took her position behind, but to the left of Owain, watching Owain's hands as the light dimmed each passing second. Finally, the light vanished releasing the vampires. She hoped that they'd take Owain seriously and leave, but in her heart, she knew that they were past the stage of reason,

Colette remained crouched as the vampires moved as one and tried surrounding her and Owain, knew that with the tables in the way, it wouldn't be effective. She inhaled deeply, allowing her mind to clear of everything but the tableau before her. The largest vampire moved toward her as the ringleader charged Owain. The other two acted as backup, ready to move in at any second.

In the blink of an eye, the beefy vamp grabbed at her right arm as she dove to the left. She brought up her boot and slammed it into his face. Once again, Davyd's voice rang in her mind as she shifted her weight, sending her boot into one kneecap, shattering it. *Be mindful, keep moving. If you stop they can overwhelm you. Take them out with hits to the heart, their eyes, and their neck. Once you get them in the vulnerable areas, break their neck, then either rip out their heart or set them on fire. Only then will you be safe, and they'll be dead.*

She felt the other vampire rush toward her while she finished off the burly guy with her blade, using a quick in-and-out motion. Without waiting for the big man to fall, Colette shifted her weight backward, lashing out at the flicker of movement as the greasy-looking vampire missed her in his first attack. She landed in a crouched position and growled at the vampire. "Come on, asshole! You afraid of a girl slayer?"

The vampire launched at her, his fists closed. Leaning into the blow, Colette brought her daggers together at his chest in a scissor pattern. Both blades sunk in, hitting the mark, as Colette reeled backward due to the impact, releasing her daggers as she fell backward. Knowing that there was still one more vampire unaccounted for, she rolled under a table, then slid into a crouching position. Seeing Owain finish off the last vampire, Colette scooted across the floor toward her latest kill. Taking out her daggers, Colette wiped the blood off the blades on the dead man's clothes, then slid them into their sheaths. She rushed to Owain's side as she saw more vampires approaching in their direction.

"You okay?" Her words came out in pants as they circled around, keeping their backs together tightly.

"Couple of scratches. You?" His voice sounded tight and deeper, but she knew he wasn't lying to her.

She shrugged as they continued their slow circular movement, not letting anyone have a clear shot at either of them. "Sore, but no blood from me. At least not yet. I see that the leader just refuses to up and die."

"Fantastic. Can we leave now? I don't like the friends you find off the street." His voice was taut and a bit harsh, but she understood the sentiment completely.

"You'll leave in body bags, Helsinger lover," growled the leader, wiping away blood from his mouth. "There's no creature in here that'll tolerate you consorting with the enemy."

"Do you all agree?" Owain called out to those who remained watching around the edges of the restaurant, away from being caught in any cross fire. "Am I consorting with an enemy when all she does is her job removing the scum from among us?"

People muttered angrily while they shook their heads from side-to-side. One man, a shifter, called out, "I know of this woman, this Helsinger. She searches for those who killed her family and have killed other people who have broken the laws that serve our peoples. Never has she ever harmed any of us who've obeyed and lived in peace."

"I, too, have heard of this Helsinger doctor. She helped a small, sick shifter child in Japan and assisted at a vampire birth in Joppa," another agreed.

Another, deeper voice shouted, "Let them alone, or be dealt with by those of us who know your crimes."

The two remaining vampires, those that Owain had fought, but hadn't killed, stopped and backed up. Colette knew that the witnesses in the restaurant were threatening turning in the vampires, subjecting them to the laws of their House and Council. In some cases she

heard, it was worse to face the Head of House since their word was absolute law and none of the Heads tolerated breaking of laws that protected both vampire and mortal. She didn't envy them as it wasn't a easy decision -- die at the hands of your enemies or possibly die at the hands of your House that created you.

Yet, it surprised her how much was known about her actions, ones she thought were done in secret. However, no matter how much good she'd done in helping some of the preternaturals, she was guilty of killing vampires in her blind rage to avenge her family. Even here in the restaurant, she could've fought her attackers into running or giving up, but instead, she slaughtered them. Owain was right -- there were as many good vampires as there were bad ones. Her heart trembled with the thoughts of those she had murdered in cold blood. *How many were innocent of any wrongdoing?*

Lowering her right hand slightly, she locked eyes with the long-haired vampire that stood closest to her. "You heard them. Are you still willing to kill me and risk death by your peers? Do you want me to destroy you instead so you won't have to deal with the pain and torture they'll inflict upon you for breaking the laws? I'd rather we both walk away and never see each other again."

His eyes widened, then glowed with an inhuman anger. She stepped back, but didn't raise her right hand, though she watched every twitch his body made. His voice came out low, gritty, and filled with harsh derision. "How would you know pain? You kill those who are different from you without ever considering that they may be innocent of the crimes others say they did. For that alone, you can fucking die, bitch!" His body launched at her, his teeth flashing. Death hung in the air.

Instinctively, Colette dove forward, keeping her knives facing out as she somersaulted past the vampire. She swiveled around on the balls of her feet as the vampire crashed against the table and fell to the floor. Instinctively, she leapt on his back, pulled on his hair and placed one blade against his neck. "Die or live. It's that easy, vampire. After your actions, I can care less what you choose, but you will abide by your choice and not change your mind once spoken."

His hand shot up, slapping her with his knuckles hard across her mouth. She flinched at the pain, then drew her blade across his neck as her other hand slid her silver dagger deep between his eighth and ninth ribs, stopping his heart permanently. The vampire exhaled one last time, the air shuddering as blood oozed from his wound. She released the vampire's head, letting it hit the ground with a slight thud. She hadn't wanted to do this, but he wouldn't have walked away, thus forcing her to kill him so his House would be spared the indignity. Raising herself up off the floor, Colette headed toward the leader who had started the whole fight. Rage and anguish warred in her soul, and she knew that this had to end before Owain or anyone else got hurt. Too much blood shed, too many lives wasted. "Owain, move out of the way. He's mine to deal with now that he condemned his brothers in Clan to death."

Owain shook his head and refused to move, holding his hand out toward her as if that would stop her. “No, enough blood has been shed. Don’t shed more if it’s not needed, Colette.”

“My honor is at stake, not to mention my life. If he is released, he’ll seek me out with others that he’ll recruit for that one purpose, breaking yet more laws. Plus, there are other Helsingers whose lives will be at risk. Helsingers came about for a reason and part of it is the fact that when other means of disciplining the preternaturals have failed, we alone will hunt them down and kill them. It removes the guilt from those who wonder if it’s the right thing to do, but can’t or won’t do it themselves. If you don’t move, Owain, you’re saying his way is the right way and that what he’s done is acceptable to all preternaturals, and it’s okay to continually break the laws.”

Owain sighed, but shook his head. He lifted one hand toward her, but she brushed it aside and tried moving past him, only to be stopped by him beating her to the opening. “Killing him won’t stop future attacks from other preternaturals, and you know that. All here know you’re a good person, Dr. Colette Wylde. Don’t compound the problem by taking the law into your own hands, even if it would save lives in the long run. You’re a healer, not a cold-blooded murderer, Colette. Don’t let your blood-thirst blind you to the oath you swore when you became a doctor.”

Suddenly, Sahim stepped in between Owain and the last remaining vampire, blocking Colette completely off as she finally slid past a surprised Owain. “Kill him not, *Sitt Hakim*. You are better than he. Leave him to those of us whom he’s hurt.” His amber eyes flashed with hate toward the vampire.

A mere innocent risks his life to stop me from killing yet another person. Can I take the risk that the others whom he speaks for will follow through on what he’s promised? Can I afford to not take that chance? Realizing that she had to trust them, and they were trying to save her from falling over an edge that she might not ever return from, Colette curtly nodded toward Sahim.

“As you will, Sahim.” Her voice was hoarse; her shoulders sagged slightly as if the world sat firmly on her shoulders. She gestured at the vampire that stood behind Sahim. “He is yours to deal with. You’re right, I’ve done enough tonight.”

The preternaturals in the room moved forward, moving past her, Owain, and Sahim, encircling the vampire. He looked shocked and yelled, “You can’t do this to me!”

“They can. They are,” Colette responded as she slid her daggers into their sheaths, then looked back at the brave, young man who broke the blood-lust spell she had found herself in.

Sahim’s eyes glimmered with deadly intent as he bowed to Colette, then turned to face the vampire. “There are those among us that need raw meat and blood to stay alive, vampire. I think that even though you’re a bit on the thin side, you will be able to feed quite a few of our regulars.”

Colette turned away from the mob scene and walked toward the front door. Though they might've helped her regain a portion of her humanity, she had often thought that preternatural justice was often worse than being killed cleanly. As she pulled open the door, the faint sound of begging reached her hearing, then a high-pitched scream.

A hand grasped her shoulder, surprising her. Spinning around to attack, she stopped just in time as Owain called her name softly. Neither of them looked behind them, but she knew that they'd never forget this moment.

"Let's go home, Col."

Quietly, she followed. Something in her had changed in the past few months. She wasn't quite sure what exactly was happening, but no longer was she just Dr. Colette Wylde, fertility specialist. There was something darker that had embraced part of her soul, and she wasn't sure that it was wrong for it to be there. *Morrighu, have mercy on my soul.*

Chapter Six

The ride home was quieter than the last time, and Colette hoped that Owain wouldn't say anything, as she wasn't sure she could handle any harsh remarks. Twenty minutes later, Owain pulled into the driveway and parked the car. Colette didn't wait, but quickly rushed out of the car and headed toward the house. She needed to clean herself from the blood and other things that clung to her body, but she doubted the hottest water would ever cleanse her soul from the broken oaths of which she was guilty. Owain said nothing to her as he unlocked the door and silenced the security system.

She flew down the hallway, stopping only to grab washcloth, towel, shampoo, change of clothes, and other toiletries. Then she took over the bathroom, barricading herself behind the locked door as tears fell unchecked. The shower water felt biting hot on her skin, but she didn't turn it down as she scrubbed her body from head to toe, then repeated it until the water ran cold.

No matter how much she scrubbed and tried cleaning herself, the vampire's accusations rang in her ears, haunting her with the fact that she wasn't better than those the Helsingers hunted. After she dried off, she dressed in fresh undergarments, not wanting to put anything else on her body, as she still felt unclean in her soul. Colette opened the bathroom door and almost ran into the person standing directly in front of the door. It was Owain. As she looked into his steadfast gaze, what infinitesimal control she had gathered dissolved as sobs shook her body. Colette walked past Owain, her face stained with fresh tears that she tried to wipe away. "I'm a killer, O. A fucking killer who couldn't see past the need for revenge. I'm just as bad as those who killed my family."

Owain gripped her arm, tugging her against his hard chest. "No, Col. That's not true and you know it." Forcing her chin up, his deep eyes locked with hers. "Listen to me. I mean it, none of that pretending to listen shit you do when you don't want to hear something you don't like."

Colette tried pulling away, but he kept her against his body. The heat of his flesh burned into her skin. Part of her wanted to just give in to his warmth and comfort, but the other part wanted to run far away. “Well, if you’d say something worth listening to, I wouldn’t ignore the rest.”

Owain released her and glared. “Your smart-ass remarks aren’t helping this much. I know you hurt, but those you killed were cold-blooded killers. They didn’t care who they destroyed. You did a favour to mankind by killing them. It might go against your oath, but aren’t you supposed to save lives by any means necessary?”

Colette sagged to the floor of the room, her body trembling. “I can’t believe I took lives. I’m trained to save them, not shed them.”

Owain pulled her on his lap, wrapping his strong arms around her. “Shh, Col. It’s okay. Think about the lives you’ve saved by stopping them. How many would’ve died had you not gotten rid of those vampires?”

She lay there in his arms, sobbing for herself and for those lives lost. Owain kept stroking her hair, reminding her of those who she had saved by her appearance and who now lived. *Did those lives count?* Her mind thought on that. Were those lives she had saved any less sacred than the vampires she had destroyed?

“You don’t think I angered the gods by exterminating some of those vampires, do you?”

Owain chuckled and tilted her chin up. “Doll, we helped create the Helsingers by order of Morrighu. Do you think that the gods would mind if the vampires weren’t getting out of control?”

Colette leaned forward, kissing Owain’s chin, her hands sliding up his naked chest. “So the Helsingers were created to help keep a balance among the vampires and the living?”

Owain nodded as his hand captured hers. “Exactly. It’s that nature cycle we all are part of.” His free hand caressed her cheek, then down her neck until his palm lay between her lace-covered breasts.

A small gasp escaped from Colette’s lips as his hand deftly undid the front clasp of her bra, exposing her rounded breasts to his gaze. Sliding his thumb across one stiff nipple, Owain dipped his head and captured the other in his mouth.

Arching into him, Colette gripped his shoulders while her mouth suckled on his exposed neck. Tempted, she bit him, feeling the shiver that coursed through his body.

“Col, don’t do that,” he moaned as he switched to the other breast. “You really don’t want to unleash the beast within.”

Her chuckle filled the room as relief filled her soul. “Hell yes, I do!” Then she bit him harder where the neck met the shoulder, feeling his flesh shudder as a loud growl poured from his throat. Continuing, Colette nipped hard then softly up and down his neck, until finally she bit the front of his throat as his hands teased her breasts.

Owain's eyes shifted to the darker, more feral look that reminded her of when they had fought those others. Yet, there was something else there -- desire. Colette shifted so her legs wrapped around his waist, her mons rocking against his erect cock.

Clasping the back of her neck with one hand, Owain tugged on her hair, urging her to expose her neck more. "My turn, babe."

His mouth whispered over the delicate skin of her neck, her body shivering slightly as wet trail marks traced his path. When he got to where her carotid artery pulsed with life beneath his lips, Owain paused, smelling the life and bounty within her body. He felt her body wiggle against his, her taut nipples pressed against his chest, hardening his cock as lust built up within him for his warrior woman. Slowly, he licked her skin then with a quick decision, Owain bit into Colette, allowing her lifeblood to fill his mouth.

The warmth of her life, the tang of her essence filled his senses and his soul. Careful only to take just a mouthful, Owain's tongue licked over the punctures that he had created. Colette nipped at his cheek, causing him to swallow the lifeblood, feeding him with energy and a need to take her, hard and swift. His hands moved to cup her full breasts as he pulled from her neck, licking the site where his teeth had punctured her, making the marks invisible.

As he rasped his thumbs across her tight nipples, she shuddered against him. Owain kissed down the center of her chest, and she arched against him, demanding that his mouth soothe her dusky nipples. He felt her fingers fist in his hair, then pull until his mouth slid over one breast. Drawing the large nipple into his mouth, he bit down on it before sucking. Colette gasped as she pressed him against her breasts again.

"O, gods ... your mouth," she whimpered. "More, O. I need more."

"The taste of you incites my fire, Col," Owain whispered as he laved his tongue over the other breast, bringing her to one orgasm without even touching her more sensitive pussy. Deliberately, Owain slid down her body, his tongue swirling in free-form patterns over her abdomen. Only when he reached her mons did he stop, glancing toward Colette's face. Her blue eyes were dark with lust and acceptance of him as they made love.

He could easily fall in love with this woman and knew that he was partially there already. He knew that she met most of the requirements, but at this moment, the only thing that mattered was loving her so she realized how important she was to him. Owain dipped his head, swirling his tongue through her curly auburn hair that covered her mons. Then parting her wet nether lips with his fingers, he slid his tongue across her exposed clit.

Colette bucked her hips upward as she moaned for him to help her orgasm again.

"Not yet, Col. I'll get there when I get there," he chuckled.

"Hurry up, you're killing me with that damn mouth of yours," she rasped as her fists clenched and unclenched in his hair.

“Is baby having a needy moment?” Owain tilted his head as his tongue lapped at her curls.

“Baby is demanding that you suck me, O!”

“Tsk tsk tsk. Baby needs to ask.” He paused and blew across the wetness causing her skin to pucker with goose bumps and Colette shuddered, her hands grasping at the carpet.

“Please, Owain. Please suck on me?” Her words came out in pants as she leaned her head back against the floor.

His mouth replied as his fingers splayed open the rosy skin and her clit throbbed in need. Owain’s tongue lapped at her clit, swirling around it, but not really touching it as two of his fingers slid deep into her. She moaned as she grasped at the floor, trying to find something to hold onto. Owain grinned against her soft, exposed flesh, then drew the firm clitoris into his mouth, suckling hard. Colette screamed as her orgasm ripped through her body.

Owain lifted his head while sliding two long fingers deep inside Colette. He increased the tempo of his fingers, sliding in and out of her as her hand slid behind his neck, drawing him close. His smile was potent as her tongue licked his lips.

“I want your cock in me, O. Now,” she whispered with a moan as his fingers curled deep inside her.

“Not yet.”

“Now!”

“No, come for me,” he purred as he slid in a third finger to join the other two. Colette screamed her release as her mouth covered his.

As her lips moved over his, her tongue darting in tasting his musky male essence, her mouth nipped the corner of his lips, then slid down his jawline. Owain’s body slid over hers, his hard cock nudging against her for entrance. As his cock slid home, claiming her, Colette’s mouth aimed for the juncture between his neck and shoulder, her teeth biting through the skin, drawing blood.

Owain moaned as her mouth suckled a small amount of his blood and her tongue lapped against the marks. He kept himself deep inside, unmoving until her hips rocked against him, drawing him deeper into her warmth. “Oh, babe, the things you do to me.”

“Yeah, well, you do a lot for me, too,” she muttered as her lips captured his. Wrapping her legs around him, Colette urged him into a fast, hard rhythm.

As he pulled almost out of her, she whimpered in protest. With care, he lay her down on the floor. Kissing her bottom lip, Owain slid her legs further up to his shoulders, then impaled her repeatedly with his cock as their emotions intertwined and climbed higher.

“O, please, now,” she begged, her breaths coming out raggedly.

He shook his head, smiling down at the woman beneath him. Regardless of what happened before and whatever they might face ahead of them, they were together. Granted,

the thrill of the hunt was there for them both, but it was more than that. There was something about her that made him want to protect her, kiss her, and fuck her senseless. The idea of her leaving after this research project terrified him. He didn't want her to leave.

He paused midstroke. As she moaned, Owain leaned forward, his cock sinking slowly into her pussy as his lips captured hers. *Be the One for me. Be my soul mate.* Then he moved his mouth over her neck and sank his fangs in her. His cock plunged hard into her, causing them both to tumble over the edge.

Slowly Colette came down from the high of making love to Owain. As her breathing slowed to normal, she looked into the deep eyes of the man over her. It amazed her how easily she could let herself go with him. Though sensual, she'd never let herself lose control and be demanding like she was with this man. What was it that Kirstie had told her? Oh yeah, something about the Maraighs invoked safety and sexuality in each breath.

"You're beautiful when you're pensive," Owain whispered as he brushed away some of the stray hair that clung to her face. "What are you thinking?"

Colette smiled at him as she slid her legs off his shoulders. "I'm thinking I need a drink and you need to feed."

Owain grinned, his fangs showing. "But I just fed, and I'm full."

"In that case, I'm starved." She slid out from under him and stood up. Her nakedness shone in the pale light, and he grinned at the effect she had on him.

"Alright, but I think we need to make plans to leave this place and head to Ireland. Shane, another *cúntóir*, has some information for me and I need to see if one of my brothers can petition Morrigu for me."

Colette followed him as he went to the kitchen. She watched him as he whipped together some food, comfort food at its finest. Once he was done, they sat at the kitchen table and ate. They talked of inconsequential things, avoiding talk about what had happened earlier. There was something there that needed saying, but neither of them could handle the emotion it would bring.

"I'll make ticket arrangements. We need to get to Ireland as soon as possible." Owain refilled her glass.

"Sounds good. Let me know our flight arrangements. I have a friend there who does research and is supposed to bring me some information." Colette sipped her juice. "Are we going to stay in Ireland?"

"I'm not sure, really. There's much to be done, and I don't think the main thrust of vampire history comes from Ireland, though I'm sure Morrigu plays a part in it."

"Do you think that Riana is right and we should head to Mexico?"

"It seems reasonable. I think whatever sources Shane has dug up will either confirm or deny it." He rubbed his forehead. "I hate to leave Egypt with things unsettled, but I have friends who'll look after this place while we're gone."

"Any tests that need to be completed? I can help record results if you wish."

"Thanks. Why not? It'll help get things moving along." Owain escorted her downstairs into his lab.

* * * * *

Four hours later, Colette rubbed her eyes and completed the last notes on a finished experiment. "This one is done and ready to be destroyed." She found that his destroying the samples was a good precaution in case the samples fell into the wrong hands. "Anything else?"

"No, I'm done here, too. We're going to be leaving Cairo via Egypt Air to London, then switching to Aer Lingus from there. Our final flight is on Aer Lingus, Flight Number 7223. We'll be arriving at three p.m. their time. The gate is A-13."

"Great. Let me call Eileen and let her know to expect us then." Colette grabbed her cell phone. She dialed a number and waited. "Sorry to disturb you, Eye, but I'm arriving on Aer Lingus, flight seventy-two twenty-three, gate A thirteen."

"We'll be there tomorrow. Our flight leaves in the morning," Owain interspersed.

"Tomorrow then, Eye. You got the info that I requested from Riana?"

"Got it and made copies for the grove's library as well. You doing okay? Riana said things were a bit unusual for you."

"I'm fine. New job, interesting boss."

"Sounds good then, Col. I'll see you when you get here. Anything else you might need?"

Colette thought about that for a minute, chewing at her thumbnail. "Not sure, probably nothing major. I'm not sure we're staying longer than the day."

"If you need something more, let me know. The flight is about nine hours, so call me anytime during the trip if something comes up. Later." Colette closed her phone and smiled.

"All set on my end. Anything you need to do?"

Owain shook his head. "No, just need to get online and do some things there. Then I'll be done and ready to leave. You need to pack still?"

"I'm pretty much packed, but I need some sleep." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Come join me when you're done."

She left him alone to finish his work. He was grateful to her for knowing he needed some away time. Booting up his computer, he quickly logged online and signed into the Marauder network. Quickly he uploaded the files dealing with the latest experiments,

including the handwritten notes that he scanned and uploaded to his private file area. Then he instant-messaged his brother, Finn.

Owain: You busy, deárthaír?

Finn: What's going on? Long time no see.

Owain: My search is narrowing down. Found out some interesting info from the Cairo Museum. Spoke to Dr. Ola Mahdi.

Finn: Really? The same Ola that was once high priestess of Sekhmet? What did she have to say?

Owain: That Sekhmet traveled to see gods about the vampires. Read how she helped make the original blood drinkers alongside a few more blood gods.

Finn: What do you need from me?

Owain: I need an audience with Morrighu.

Finn: You're asking a lot. She barely tolerates seeing Miach and me. What's this about?

Owain: I need to find out her part in the making of the vampires.

Finn: Didn't Shane and Patrick do research on that already? Why do you need to confront Morrighu?

Owain: Because she turned my twin and me into vampires. She made Cadrus into a vampire. There has to be a reason why she did that on First Night.

Finn: I will ask her. When will you be arriving in Eire?

Owain: Tomorrow afternoon.

Finn: I'll send word with Shane or Patrick.

Owain: Thanks, deárthaír.

Finn: Watch your back and be careful with Colette. She's a good woman, just a bit confused on her place in things.

Owain: Yeah, I know. I do like her, Finn.

Finn: What about love?

Owain: It's too soon, but I could easily. I'm just not sure she could love me unconditionally.

Finn: Believe. It can happen. Look at Kirstie and Niam. They are in love, deeply and they accept each other as they are.

Owain: It's hard being a blood drinker. But, if one of us has made it, it is a sign that the rest of us might indeed be freed sometime.

Finn: Indeed. I have faith that one day my soul mate will come now. Now that we know that those marked do exist. I only hope she can understand my place as ovate.

Owain: I hope so, too. Take care and rest, Finn. I'll talk to you sometime later.

Finn: Oiche mhaith, mo dheartháir.

Shutting down his computer, Owain considered Finn's words. He was right. Morrighu was unlikely to see him, but he had to try. And then there was Colette. Just this short time with her had begun playing havoc with his heart. He cared for her deeply. Very deeply. There was no doubt in his mind that she could be the one to release him from his curse. But unless she loved him unconditionally, there was no way of release.

Turning off the lights in the lab, Owain climbed the stairs and locked the door. They had to leave early in the morning and a good night's sleep was necessary. He discarded his clothes and climbed naked into his bed. Colette turned toward him, wanting to be held close. His arms wrapped around her body, he looked into her sleeping face and smiled. "Soon, we'll know the answers and be able to help those in need."

She murmured something in her sleep and curled against him more. Brushing a stray lock of brunette hair, Owain kissed her cheek. "Good night, my *grá*. *Oiche mhaith*. Sleep well."

Owain's eyes closed and his breathing evened out as sleep collected him gently and his mind moved him to a time so long ago; he had never forgotten it, but hadn't dwelt much upon it either. It was the time of the First Night.

* * * * *

His head remained bowed as he carved the raven from the yew wood. It had bled when he asked the sacred tree for a piece to create an image of darkness. There was no forgiveness to be had from Morrighu, and his brothers and he knew it. But perhaps in giving her something sacred, a willing piece of himself, he might at least buy Donal and Miach some kind of freedom. Tonight was the night. She had warned them all.

In the distance, a dog barked and a babe cried. Owain sighed. This night would live forever burned in his memories until his death. Gods alive he hoped that Morrighu would let him die swiftly and without dishonour. He finished making the last of the cuts, enjoying the feel of the wood in his hands. A jolt of pain shot up his neck, almost stunning him in the intensity. His twin was hurt and needed help.

"Niam, I'm coming!" he whispered, his hands dropping the raven, the totem of Morrighu.

"No, you are not, Owain Maraigh. You shall remain where you are." The words were cold, while the voice sounded like honey smoothness. Owain recognized the voice of his patron.

He looked around, trying to see where the goddess stood, but saw no one. He dared not disobey her, but his brother was in agony. "Morrighu, I bid you to let me see mo dheartháir. He's in pain and needs help."

Then before his eyes, the goddess appeared, dressed in black, her violet eyes flashing. "What you feel is not just pain, but the result of his punishment."

Owain stepped back and knelt in obedience in front of the goddess. "Then we're not to die?"

Her laughter filled him with dread. "Oh, no, dear twin of Niam. You shall not die this night or any other to come. You shall serve in the darkness and repent of your deeds against me and mine."

His head lifted, dark eyes meeting hers. "Then what will you do to me, Lady Goddess of war? Before you act, accept this gift as proof of my acceptance of your decision." With deft fingers, he picked up the raven, handing it to the goddess.

Morrigu received it, studying the details as well as feeling the magick imbued within each carved stroke of her totem, and Owain knew that on some level she had accepted his gift though it didn't mean that she'd do as he planned on asking of her. She smiled as she noticed the dark red yew sap on her fingers. "Oh, I like this, twin of Niam, son of Eowan. Remove your clothes and lay upon the ground beneath this life-giving yew."

Without question, Owain followed her orders. His boots, breeches, and his tunic he removed deftly, saying not one word. After folding them, he laid silently on the cold, hard ground, feeling the leaves and grass beneath him. Perhaps she would allow him to have an immram, an inner soul journey, before proceeding, but he doubted it highly.

"Oh, this is like a living immram, dear Owain. Tilt your head up, show me your neck as if I wanted to slice your head from it." The Morrigu crouched beside him, her long nails raking his naked skin. When he complied, her nails raked across his neck, her body shivering slightly in the chilled air. "You are rambunctious, unlike your twin, but you share a similar respect for life. Yet, my daughter's life was forfeited. How do you rationalize that?"

Owain swallowed. He knew this would come. "We were told --"

"You were told? Do you believe all you're told to do without question?"

"When it comes with your mark, yes." Owain stared into the eyes of the war goddess. "Had we questioned anything with your mark, you'd have killed us for disobedience. Now you wish me to have disobeyed? Which do you prefer, goddess of blood, death, and fear?"

"Defiant are we? For that, you are right. I love war and the sound of imminent death. To hear war drums and pipes sound as people fight and clash. The spilling of blood to satisfy the dark urges. For your words, you shall need blood to drink, and on occasion you shall spill it in your need to stay alive. Only this way can you feel my wrath!"

He couldn't move. Her hands touched him, caressing his skin, making his blood heat with desire and more. Never had he craved intimacy with her, but now, now he needed to be inside her, fucking her mindlessly. When her hands stroked his cock, a moan erupted from his throat. "Morrigu, please, don't ... my brother, Niam ..."

"I shall do as I please, Owain Maraigh, you best remember that. I am the goddess and you are mortal, at least for a few moments longer. From blood that flows to the blood that sinks into the earth, with this I curse thee. You shall feed on blood and crave it. Without it, you will be in eternal pain, but I will not allow you to die." Her mouth closed upon his, her teeth ripping his bottom lip, blood filling both their mouths.

She pulled back, baring her breast, her nipple taut and begging to be suckled. Pressing it to his mouth, his lips surrounded the purplish tip, his teeth rasping, teasing it. Her moan made him chuckle internally, knowing at least in this, he was giving her pleasure. Her hand stroked his cock in time with his suckling, his other hand freed to play with her other breast. Suddenly she pushed his face deeper against her rounded flesh.

"Bite me, drink of my blood, Owain Maraigh. Bite me and drink, I command it!" Her voice was hoarse with desire and something else, Owain noted.

He shook his head, but she pressed until his mouth and nose were completely covered. Without a doubt in his mind, he knew she'd suffocate him as well as work magick upon him. Her nails bit into his cock and scrotum. Instinct took over reason and he bit her nipple hard, feeling warm liquid trickle into his mouth as she eased back enough for him to inhale through his nostrils.

"There you go, Owain. Drink of my blood. Drink and become one with the night creatures." Her body rocked over his as he continued to drink and touch her body.

He couldn't say when he finished drinking of the blood milk that emerged from her body, but he felt the changes as a severe pain surged through his belly. His hands gripped her breasts tightly as his body trembled in pain. "Morrighu!"

"The change comes, Owain. Don't fight it; revel in it as it'll be the life you'll lead for all time. Not even Arawn can touch you once you've changed." Her body pressed against his, her wetness between her thighs caressing his cock, causing him to gasp aloud. "Feel my arousal, Druid? Feel the heat that burns within me at the sight of my blood in your mouth and trailing down your chin?"

He opened his eyes in shock.

"Yes, the sight of blood arouses me like none other, Owain, fallen Druid. The sight of you drinking my blood has me hot and needy, but I'll not slake my thirst upon you. That will fall to another of your brothers. Now you're a creature of the night, a vampire."

Owain cringed, remembering tales of the blood drinkers. Now, because of his patroness, he was one of them. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he gazed upon her harsh beauty. "As you will, my goddess. How shall I feed and not kill anyone?"

Her smile was mocking and yet filled with something else. "You will learn to only take what you need to sustain you. You can eat regular foods, go out by day, you can even drink. But you must drink blood at least once a day and more often when you've fought against those who would destroy this world."

He bowed his head. "I shall serve the side of light and yourself as I have always done, Morrigu."

"Yes, you shall. vampire droi you are. vampire droi you'll forever be. I leave now, but remember you must feed. Try not to kill your friends while you learn to control your hunger, fallen Owain." With those parting words, the Morrigu vanished into the night, nothing but the sound of a raven's laughter to remind him of what he'd just gone through.

"Gods around us, what price for being deceived," Owain whispered as he slowly dressed, aware of how his senses seemed more acute in the darkness. Once he was fully clothed, he began seeking his brothers. How the Isle of Iona looked so very different on this night. How everything looked different now that he was forever changed, due to one act of unknowing disobedience.

Chapter Seven

Colette wanted to scream. The flight was longer than she wanted to sit through but there was no other choice. They were beginning their final descent and soon would arrive at Dublin airport. *Thank the gods for small favors. I was starting to think that we'd never arrive. Riana is nuts to fly so damn much. I wanna go home and not travel for a while. My ass hurts.*

"We'll be there in about fifteen minutes. You've been remarkably patient, Col," Owain said with a wink, and she knew that he had picked up on her fidgetiness. "Is there anything you'd like to see while we're in Dublin for the day?"

"A good pub and perhaps a library."

"A library?"

Colette smiled fully. "What can I tell you, I need to verify the data I'm given, plus I want to see if I can get a message to one of my other friends."

"A Helsinger?"

"No, she's not one of us. She's a normal female with a new baby. I want to let her know I received her email with the pictures of my godson." She removed a small picture case from her pack. Handing it to Owain, she chuckled. "In a way, I'm a doting godmother. Not the fairy godmother type, though. Almost wish I was."

Owain leafed through the pictures and noticed both the young infant's interspersed with pictures of her nephew and sister. "He's adorable. What's his name?"

"Cadon Anthony. He turned four months old today."

"Wonderful. No wonder you want to let her know you're okay. Shouldn't be a problem. There are Internet cafes around Dublin we can stop at as well."

Colette nodded. "Great. It'll make it easier. I don't want Kelly worrying about me too much. She only knows I took a sabbatical from work for a while."

The airline stewardess interrupted their tête-à-tête, reminding them to push their seats into the upright position. They waited until she moved on and looked out the window as the plane reached the tarmac. The plane came to a stop, then slowly rolled to its designated disembarking area. Colette collected her pack while handing Owain's his. "Thank gods we're here. I don't think I could've flown another hour without getting down on the ground and making love to it."

His chuckle warmed her heart and soul. "Wouldn't you prefer making love to a man?"

"Only if he was the one putting my ass on the ground, O." She winked at him, a teasing smile creasing her lips. "But in this case, the ground possesses slightly more stability than a male who moves."

They undid their seatbelts and stood as the crew thanked all the passengers for being on their flight. Moving quickly, they were able to disembark without a long wait as they were near the front of the aircraft. Owain gestured for her to follow him toward the baggage claim area. Walking down the stairs, Colette felt her muscles begin stretching in relief. Though their seats were comfortable, she was aware of the numbness in her right ass cheek from sitting too long. The walking helped relieve the stiffness in her left knee, a leftover reminder of the crash on her bike over ten months ago.

"How much further 'til we're out of here?"

"Not much. Just need to go to baggage claim now we're past security."

Colette grinned. "Never realized you're such a big shot." His snort made her chuckle. "Hey, it's not everyday I get to walk through security that fast and without much of a hassle."

"Marauders have their perks."

"So I see. When do I get the bennies, babe?"

"Did you not get through Customs quickly?"

Colette pouted. "That's all I get?"

"What more do you want?"

Her head tilted. "You know, I'm not too sure, but I'll think of something."

"Somehow I'm not surprised, Col. I'm really not."

Two men standing near one of the baggage areas talking with a woman caught her attention. There was a look about them, not just the traditional Celtic look, one dark-haired, the other a light brown, but their nonchalant look reminded her of Davyd. "Those two must be for you." Her thumb aimed at them. "*Cúntoír*, right?"

"Yeah. I don't recognize the woman speaking to Patrick, though. Can you get our bags while I talk with them?" Owain didn't wait for an answer, but strolled over toward the two men.

Focusing his attention upon the O'Connors, Owain deliberately eavesdropped on what was going on. They knew better than to bring anyone not approved to a rendezvous point. If this was a spur-of-the-moment thing, as it seemed to be, they still deserved to be disciplined for playing during company time. But that would be Miach who would do that if Owain ratted them out. Perhaps he could benefit from their error. Calling forth his vampiric senses, Owain suddenly heard what was said between the O'Connors and the blonde women as well as see them clearly, without interference as various passengers passed in front of the group.

Patrick spoke quietly to the beautiful woman. "So after this is done, we can go for something to eat and perhaps go for a ride of some kind?"

"I'm not sure if I should. I mean, I barely know you."

"If you trust Shane, you'll be amazed at how much more trustworthy I am."

The blonde kissed his cheek. "This I'm sure of. Yet, for some reason, I find myself wanting someone a bit more dangerous and a little less trustworthy." Her mouth took his and after a moment, she pulled back, leaving a slightly stunned Patrick O'Connor. "Maybe another time, Paddy."

She winked at Shane, then walked away from the O'Connors.

Shane clasped his brother on the shoulder. "Life goes on. She wasn't really much your type anyway."

Biting back laughter, Owain knew that there wasn't anything that he could use for leverage, but what had happened would make great fodder on the bulletin board system at the Maraigh website. With a deep inhalation, Owain urged his senses to return to their former state. The exhalation brought all his senses back to normal as he gestured toward the O'Connors and closed the gap between them.

"Hey, you two. How are things in Eire?"

The dark-haired, dark-eyed Shane shook Owain's hand. "Doing great, Owain. Finn's been keeping me busy, but never too busy to pull one over *mo dheartháir*. How are you doing?"

Patrick gave Owain a brief hug. "Things are fine. Donal and I are finishing a few issues up north, but otherwise, we're good to go."

Lifting a brow at Patrick, Owain nodded. "Sounds like my brothers are keeping you both on your toes. You've got the information I need?"

Shane handed over the file folder. "Finn also told me that I'm to inform you that I'll be picking you up around midnight. He said come prepared for anything and everything. I've got the family car here for you to use while you're in Dublin."

“Great,” Owain responded, taking the keys while he glanced at the folder’s contents. “This is intriguing. Have you both read it?”

“Yeah,” Patrick stated. “Personally, it’s almost too vague on Morrighu’s role in things. There’s got to be more behind it than what is easily known.”

“Agreed, Paddy. Look, Owain, it’s not like you don’t know how the vampires work or their methods. I don’t see why you need to find out how they were created. What good will it do for your research?”

Owain shot Shane a look, causing the young man to step back. “I know you don’t get it, but trust me, it’s important. If we know the origins, then perhaps we’ll know more on how the DNA switches and whether or not using stem cells will bring a person back to normal.”

Suddenly, Colette’s voice was louder than any of the background noise. “OH, OWAIN, YOUR LUGGAGE IS GOING BY AGAIN!”

He turned and saw Colette standing with her luggage as she pointed out his red and black striped travel bag as it went by with its matching smaller bag. “DID YOU WANT ME TO GET YOU A SLAVE TO PICK IT UP FOR YOU, SAHIB?”

Shaking his head, he strode quickly to where Colette stood. His luggage had passed by. “Don’t worry, O, just like you, it will come again, I promise,” she said with a wicked grin.

“You’re a pain in the ass, Col. Why couldn’t you have gotten my luggage for me like I asked?”

“I’m sorry, I distinctly recall you not asking, but demanding. I am not a slave for you or your luggage. Had you asked nicely, I might’ve picked it up,” Colette growled. Looking to her right, she clapped excitedly. “Oh lookie, your luggage returns. It must love you and have responded to the mental plea you sent out.”

Stifling an urge to shake Colette, Owain grabbed his luggage. Behind him, he could hear the laughter of both O’Connors. “Shut up, you arses, before I beat you senseless.”

“Miss, I don’t know who you are, but that’s the first time I’ve ever seen a Maraigh put in his place,” Shane chortled as he kissed Colette’s hand. Patrick shook her hand after and added, “I’m Patrick and the suave ladykiller is Shane. It’s been a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Colette winked. “Pleasure is all mine, you two. Are you my escorts while we’re here?”

Shane grinned wider, “Well, if you are in need --”

“No, she’s not,” Owain growled, his fangs showing slightly. “She’s my coworker, and you’ll not touch her. Ever. Understood?”

Colette patted Owain’s arm. “Protective bloodsucker, isn’t he? He’s so cute when he’s all excited about my body parts. My name is Colette Wylde. You all work for Owain and his family, right?”

“Yes, we do. So, you’re a *cûntoír*, too?” Patrick asked, his eyes moving from Colette to Owain’s arm protectively wrapped around her waist. “Or perhaps something else?”

Shane nodded. "Finn said something about Owain being batty over a woman, but he wouldn't cough up details. Can't wait to tell Michael Padraig about this. He'll be hooting with laughter."

"Batty? Oh, we do need to talk, Shane," Colette said as she slipped from Owain's grasp, taking Shane's arm. "Define batty and does it mean that he adores me and I'm his goddess?"

"Take one step with her and there will be a dead *cúntóir* and a spanked *ban droi*, female Druid," Owain growled. Though he loved the way she challenged him, if there were to be someone else joining them in sexual play, it'd be someone he approved of, not just her choice. "You will not play with the help unless we agree on it. Understood, Col?"

Colette sighed and kissed Shane's cheek. "I'd hate to see you dead, though I have to admit, I bet you make many a girl happy with that blarney tongue of yours. However, the vamp has a point; I am with him and I have issues with being spanked." Shooting Owain a glare, she continued. "But unlike my male companion, I'm a lot nicer than to threaten someone who my life depends on at various times." Before she stepped back near Owain, she grabbed Shane's tight ass and sighed. "Life was so much better before I was a claimed woman. I am a claimed woman, right, Owain? Or are you just making noise like most pain-in-the-ass alpha males I know?"

Owain pulled Colette against him, ignoring the people around them. Tilting up her chin, he looked deep in her eyes. *Oh shit, I think I pushed too far.* "Yes, dear?"

"You know exactly what and who you are to me. I won't have you sully it just for flippancy's sake, Colette. I won't have it." His lips crushed her mouth, his tongue questing and claiming. When she was out of breath, Owain released her and stepped back. "You about ready to go now?"

Colette took a minute to regain her bearings. Shaking her head, she looked at the vampire before her. Did he just dismiss that kiss and her? He didn't because if he did, she was going to make him pay. Perhaps he just wanted out of the airport. "You mean ready for bed, right? Or ready for you to feed me as I'm starving and if I starve, you'll never get good work out of me."

Before Owain responded, she hefted up her luggage and headed toward the exits. Patrick shook his head. "Damn."

"Life goes on, *deárthair*. She'd have walked all over us. Hell, I think she did that to our boss," Shane grinned. "I don't think she knows where the car is though."

"Let's go and catch the woman before she causes more of a scene here in Ireland and gets us deported." Owain grabbed his luggage and strode after her.

Once outside, Colette inhaled deeply, taking in the scents of springtime. *Where the hell was Eileen?* Tapping one foot, she looked around to figure out where the guys would've parked the car.

“Looking for someone?” The female voice was damn familiar. Turning to her right, she saw Eileen walking toward her. “Sorry, I’m late. Finding a parking spot was horrendous as usual. Here are the papers you wanted.”

Colette shoved the folders unopened into her pack then hugged the young, dark-haired woman. “How are you doing, Eye?”

“As well as can be expected. Once this damn master’s thesis is done, I’ll be much happier. Then I can relax a bit before Riana forces me to get my Ph.D.”

Both women laughed. “Yeah, she’s not pushy at all is she?”

“No, never,” Eileen chuckled. She nudged her head to the left. “Do you know the three hoodlums headed this way or are you in trouble again?”

Glancing over her shoulder, Colette smirked. “Yes and yes.”

Both women waited until the dark-haired trio arrived. Quickly, Colette made introductions. “Eileen Collins, this is Owain Maraigh, Shane O’Connor, and Patrick O’Connor. Owain, Shane, Patrick, this is my good friend and fellow *ban droi*, Eileen Collins.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Eileen,” Owain said, clasping her hand.

“You’re the bloke that Col’s working with, right?”

“Yes.”

Eileen’s dark brow rose. “Yeah, you radiate vampire like it’s a sex thing. Colette, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I seem to. You going to be around if I have questions?”

Eileen nodded. “Yeah, I’m headed to the library after a bite to eat. Where are you staying if I need to find you?”

“The Alexander Hotel,” Owain chimed in. “Just call and ask for the Maraigh suite.”

“I best take my bogtrotter self outta here then,” Eileen joked, hugging Colette. “Call me on my mobile if you need me.”

“Will do, Eye. Let me know if you need me, too. We’ll be here about a day or so.”

Eileen waved to the others and walked across the street, heading toward the parking mania that awaited them all. Colette looked at the three men. “Well? We leaving or standing here all day?”

“Your chariot awaits,” Shane responded, leading them across the street to the VIP parking lot. “The car for you and Niam is the black car there on the left. Our car is the deep blue one further down on the right.”

Owain grinned. “I love VIP parking. Makes it easier to get in and out.”

Colette shook her head while dumping her luggage on the ground by the trunk, except her pack. “Must be wonderful. Can we go check into the hotel, then get some food before I decide to nibble on one of the *cûntoirs*?”

An hour later found Colette stuffed to the gills and happily considering a nap. They had gone to a Gothic style restaurant called Gallagher's. The food was impeccable and the atmosphere was definitely enough to make the vampire crowd happy. For Colette, it had been relaxing and after the agonizing plane flight, it was the perfect thing. Shane and Patrick had checked Owain and her into the hotel, then headed who knows where. Sitting in the car next to Owain, she felt safe and relaxed.

"Where to next, O?"

"You said something about going to the library. Which one?"

"There's more than one?" Colette's gaze landed on Owain.

"You have your choice of the National Archives, Dún Laoghaire Library, Royal Irish Academy, Trinity College Library where the Book of Kells is located, Central Catholic Library, Central Library of Dublin, or one of the specialist libraries. Pick one."

A whistle escaped her lips. "Well damn, you all got libraries like most people have shoe stores. I need a place that has access to ancient Celtic journals and such. Ogham writing is fine too, but not old enough." Colette patted her pack that had the folder Eileen had given her.

"Vampire hunting, are we?"

"Something like that."

"Okay, that means we'll be more likely to find out information at Chester Beatty or Trinity."

Colette perked up. "Chester Beatty? That's where Riana spends time. Can we go there?"

"On our way, my dear."

* * * * *

Colette groaned. They had limited time at the Chester Beatty, but because of Riana's name, they were able to see the sources she'd recently pulled after a confirmatory phone call. More importantly, they gave her and Owain an extra hour to glance through things. Now it was definitely beyond closing time, and they were being summarily removed.

On their way out, a young woman nodded at them and Colette gave her thanks. Once they were outside, she shivered in her coat as Owain led her to the car. "What do you think about the material Riana was looking at?"

"She knows how to research Celtic history a hell of a lot better than any of us have given her credit for. Plus, she seems to understand the twists in the Celtic Christianity legends," Owain admitted reluctantly.

Colette stopped dead in her tracks. "Oh, my gods, are you admitting she might not be the big baddie you've all painted her out to be?"

"No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying she's thorough, but not that she's always accurate."

Her snort rang through the early evening air. "Let's go to the hotel. I'm tired. Plus, we can talk more there."

The drive wasn't long and Colette raced Owain to their room, losing by only a couple of seconds. "You cheated, you big bad vampire you!"

Owain chuckled. "Why, yes, I am faster than mortals. Serves you right, stealing the key and taking off like that."

"What do you think about the *leanansidhe* legend from the Isle of Man?" Colette asked as she flopped on the giant bed.

"It ranks up there with the *dearg-due* and the *baobhan sith* legends," Owain countered, plopping down next to her. His lips brushed hers softly. "What do you think about some of these vampire legends?"

"This means ..." Colette gestured.

"It means that the legends normally have basis in fact, but I don't see how they relate to any of the gods or goddesses. Plus, the Tuatha Du Danaan aren't demigods or anything like that." Owain sighed, curling her next to him.

"I didn't see much on hand that linked any deity with vampires." Colette's hand slid over Owain's chest. "Think it's Morrighu?"

"She sheds blood, definitely. Plus, she'd be around during the time of both the *leanansidhe* and the *dearg-due* coming into being." Owain's fingers responded by slowly undoing Colette's shirt. There was something about this woman that constantly had him in semi-arousal and more. He knew he was falling for her and could only hope that she'd one day feel the same about him. Maybe one day, she might accept him being a vampire.

The phone rang, breaking them apart. "Hello?" Owain asked grouchy.

"Owain, this is Finn. I'm sending Shane to pick you up now."

"I thought you said midnight."

"Change of plans. It's now or never."

"I'll be downstairs in fifteen." Owain hung up with a sigh. "Col, I've got to go."

She looked at him. He saw the hurt expression in her eyes. "I see."

"No, I'm not leaving forever, but I've got an errand to run while I'm here. It'll confirm Morrighu's presence in the vampire history."

"Why can't I go with you?" She sat up, her arms crossing over her chest.

Standing up, he made his way to the closet, pulling out a dark pair of loose pants and a matching shirt. "Because this is a family sacred place and unless you're my wife, you can't go there."

"Oh. Like the sacred place to my nemeton?"

“Exactly. And I wouldn’t go there unless I had full permission of the grove leader or we were married. The same rules pretty much apply here. I shouldn’t be longer than about three hours.”

Colette nodded, standing. Giving him a hug, her voice lowered. “I’ll miss you, O.”

Owain kissed her hair. “I’ll come and wake you up when I get back. You can ask me anything about what happened, and I’ll explain it all.”

“Okay. Just wake me up happy.”

“Done.” With that, he stripped off the clothes he’d been wearing and replaced them with the darker, almost Oriental in tone clothing.

“Is that a karate outfit?” Colette sat on the bed, watching him.

“Similar in style. It’s very much like the clothes we wore when we were first Druids.” Owain pulled over the shirt, adjusting it into the waistband of his pants. “There are some improvements, like elastic, but the design is the same as it’s been for many years. I didn’t bring my normal ritual robe, but Finn should have one for me.”

“You’re going to be working any spells?”

“Not sure until I see Finn. Could simply be an *immram*.”

Her head nodded. “So you’ll do a journey to the Celtic Otherworld and ask for assistance in our search?”

“I’m going to follow Finn’s lead. He and Miach are the only two who’ve got the right of speaking with Morrighu and requesting her presence. I’ve agreed to whatever restrictions she’s wanting so I can question her.” Owain slid on a pair of loafers that seemed to blend with the outfit.

“Sounds a bit nerve-wracking.”

“Something like that,” he whispered as he leaned over and kissed Colette deeply, his fingers spearing into her loose hair. “I love your taste and your presence. Both I’ll miss until I get back, my *gra*.” Looking at his watch, he grumbled, then kissed her fiercely one last time. “I’ll be back soon, Col. Sleep well while I’m gone.”

“I’ll sleep better once you’re back, O.” She waved to him as he went to the door of the room.

“See you when I get back.” Then he left, shutting the door completely behind him.

Colette lay on the bed for a few minutes, breathing slowly, thinking on his words. After another minute, she reached over and pulled out the slightly banged-up folder from her pack. Opening it up, she read the notes she had made, along with the information that Eileen had gathered for her.

“Let me see about the similarities once more. Celtic legend says that a famous female called *Dearg-due* (red bloodsucker) is buried near Strongbow’s Tree in Waterford. In

Scotland, the vampire legend was called *baobhan sith*, and lurked in the mountains. The only way to stop the *dearg-due* was to pile stones and make a cairn over the body.”

Colette made notes, comparing them to the information gathered about the Egyptian vampire myths. “Let’s see, the *Leanansidhe* drains the essence from people lured to their doom. Usually known on the eastern Irish coast. Hmm, but no mention of the gods, though. I think I’ve reached the limit of what is here. Time to call Eye for more info.”

Reaching over, she dialed for an outside line, then Eileen’s number. “Beyond the fey myths of vampirism, what links to Morrighu are there for vampirism?”

“Well, hello to you too, Col. You want to know how Morrighu is linked to vampires? The blood drinkers, empathic, or the energy source ones?”

“All of the above.”

“She’s the goddess of war and often signals death. In some myths, she walks along, kissing warriors in battle. Or she does their laundry; it’s covered with blood. Then there’s Macha.”

Colette closed her eyes. “One of Morrighu’s aspects and also a minor goddess who eats the heads of slain soldiers. That would make sense, Eye. Really. Do you think she was one of the gods involved in the making of vampires, though?”

“If not with the making, then in making use of them as warriors. There’s nothing like a good warrior to her. You do know there are correlations between her and some other goddesses, including the Hindu goddess, Kali.”

“Yeah. Riana put on the notes to never summon Kali without someone there who knows the way of Kali and has appropriate sacrifices ready. That just freaks me out to no end.”

“Then there’s Badhbh, who glorifies in the gore of sacrifice. She rarely comes out except in exacting blood or emotional sacrifice,” Eileen added softly.

Colette wrote notes frantically. “How can I approach Morrighu and ask her about the vampires’ birthing process?”

There was silence on the other end of the phone for a minute or two. Eileen answered. “You don’t.”

“I need to know.”

“No, you fucking don’t, Col. Trust me on this. The information is on those pages. If you approach Morrighu, you’ll end up like Riana.” Neither of them spoke as Colette debated demanding what had happened to Riana. But before she could, Eye explained everything. “Dammit, I wasn’t supposed to say anything.” Eileen paused for a soft moment. “Listen to me, Riana isn’t here because of her asking those questions. Gisele is taking care of her in Brittany right now. Do you understand?”

Gisele was a member of both their grove and another sister *nemeton*. The fact that Riana went to Gisele belied just how badly Riana had been hurt. Gisele was head of the holly

nemeton and a good friend of Riana's. *Dammit, this isn't good. Why is Morrigu holding out on us?* "I see. She lied about being in Belgium then. Can you get a message to Riana?"

"Yes, she's letting me call her once this week. It wasn't a lie. Just after she got what she was looking for and approached Morrigu, she had to put it somewhere safe."

"Tell her we found a connection, we're heading to Mexico as she's asked, and when it's all said and done, Morrigu will pay for harming her own." Colette didn't wait for a response, but hung up the phone. Unbidden tears pricked at her eyelids. *Why do I serve her if she's going to hurt those who serve her closest? Damn the goddess for doing this to those I love!* A stray thought entered her mind. Picking up the phone, she dialed it quickly.

"The number of the wireless customer you're trying to reach can't be found. Please leave a message in the voice mail. Press one when you are finished."

Colette related the basic information to the voice mail and finished with, "Please let me know you're okay, O. Please."

Hanging up the phone, she went toward the bathroom. Perhaps a soak in the huge tub would make her feel better and relax her suddenly tense muscles.

Chapter Eight

Owain listened to his voice mail, looking at Shane in askance. “Do I dare ask what I risk by doing this?”

“I don’t know, Owain. I can only tell you what Finn goes through. Afterward you’re tired, you ache, and occasionally you bear bruises.”

“Great. Anything else I should be warned about?”

“Not that I can think of. You should be asking this of Finn. He’s the one who knows the details intimately.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Where are we heading?”

“Powerscourt.”

“The gardens? Or in the house itself?” Owain knew Powerscourt’s history. There was a nearby waterfall, one he often considered in his meditations. The house was erected in the Middle Ages, and in fact was owned by the brothers in one company name or another.

“The restaurant is closed by now, as are the gardens. We’re headed for the waterfalls and the sacred clearing.”

Owain sat back and waited for the rest of the drive to go by. Powerscourt waterfall was the tallest waterfall in Ireland. Once they had arrived and parked, both Shane and Owain made their way to the outside of the huge herbaceous borders and past the Dolphin Pond. “It’s still as beautiful as I remember it.”

“Are the Powerscourt’s related to you or the O’Connors?” Shane asked. “Finn won’t speak on it much.”

“He wouldn’t. There are personal reasons why. The Powerscourt’s were another family who knew part of our story because they also had shifters in their family. Thus, we had protection with them and we helped support their family home in exchange.”

Owain used his flashlight, lighting up his footsteps. He could've shifted form to a wolf or a bat, but considering the energy he'd be expending in ritual, there was no way he was going to do that now. "Near Pepperpot Tower, right?"

"Not quite that far out, but close. Nearer to the waterfall. Watch yourself here. Use that tree to help ease yourself up onto the ground step," Shane remarked as he leapt up the hill.

"Thanks, Shane. You're just remarkable in this place with little to no light."

Shane turned and his eyes glowed in the dim illumination. "You forgot my little benefit from hanging around you all, I take it."

Owain stopped. "Yeah, I had forgotten, I'm sorry, Shane."

"No harm, no foul. Just keep the beast inside, stay under Finn's protection until I can get better control, then train with Davyd. Shouldn't be too bad. It's hard that there's no cure."

"One day there will be, Shane. I will work my hardest to find you one." He meant it. Shane had been bit by a true lycanthrope and was a wolf once a month -- not by choice. The other times, Shane could choose to shift, but it wasn't easy for him. Not like it was for the Marauders. A Taranis minion had attacked him, but he had never complained about his lot in life. Maybe one day he'd forgive Finn and Donal for what had happened.

Owain couldn't remember much about how it had happened, but the months afterward were branded in his memory. Finn and Donal both felt hapless. Only when Owain was able to stabilize Shane's uncontrollable shifting with an infusion of Maraigh blood were things able to get better.

A voice called out to them. "Over here. To your right."

Finn. Good, now I can get some answers and find out why Col is so upset with this idea beyond that Riana was hurt in some way because of Morigu, which I don't understand. "Níl a fhios agam if I remember this path being so steep," Owain called out.

A chuckle came from behind him. Glancing behind him, he saw a tall blond man walking behind him. "Donal, you're here, too?"

"Yeah, I'm the fulcrum point for you and Finn for this *rún pléisiúr*."

"I don't know about secret pleasure, but definitely a pain in the arse." Owain clasped forearms with Donal. "Good to see you, *deárthair*."

"Can't hang out afterward, but I wanted to lend support. Finn sounded quite insistent."

"Indeed, I was. Come on, you slowpokes. You'd think you were the oldest of the nine, not the younger ones." Finn stood in front of them, looking much like Cerrunos or even Herne the Hunter. There was something disconcerting about having him look at you with those darker than dark eyes of his.

Owain bristled slightly. "I'm not that young, brother."

"Young enough, Owain Maraigh and you know it."

They followed Finn into a clearing, lit only by dimmed flashlights. "I don't want to risk a fire out here if we can avoid it. It's been a dry spell for the past two months."

"Understood."

The four men worked quietly, efficiently setting up the area for *immram* working. Though Finn and Owain would journey through the Celtic Otherworld briefly to find a place to speak with the Morrighu, the setting would allow them to move easier and quicker than if they just tried to meditate. By invoking their ancient ways, including the ingestion of certain herbs, they would be able to call open the Otherworld portal in this area, something difficult to do and maintain it on their own.

When Finn was ready, Owain sat beside him, accepting the cup that contained herbal ingredients to relax them both without getting them high or unable to endure what was to come. Feeling the warmth of the liquid flowing into his belly, Owain took six deep, centering breaths, mirroring Finn, who was doing the same. Shane sat behind Finn, while Donal took his place behind Owain.

Finn held Owain's right hand and began speaking in their native tongue. Owain felt slightly lightheaded, but trusted Finn, an Ovate skilled in the ways of meditation, healing, and going between worlds better than anyone. "We take the journey to the Otherworld, a place removed only by the will of the gods and those who've gone before us. To the many islands we journey, stopping only when we find the place in which we may speak to the Goddess Morrighu."

Just as it had done many hundreds of years ago, the clearing glowed with an otherworldly light. Both Finn and Owain stood and turned toward the glow emanating from the west. The glow opened up and became like a gateway between this world and another, one which few knew or remembered. Owain stepped forward, but Finn held him back.

"Wait. She will come to us. Stepping in there fully would make it hard to come back out."

"But we need to get in there."

"No, we need her to step out here where we have a slight advantage."

"You know more of this than I do. I bow to your wisdom," Owain intoned lowly. Though he wasn't as sure, Finn and Miach were the only two who had even semi-regular contact with Morrighu. *Please, Morrighu, come and answer some of these questions I have.*

A woman stepped out, her violet eyes glowing, drawing their attention directly to her face. She was beautiful, her black hair and red lips emphasizing her unusual eyes. "I believe you asked for my presence. What do you Marauders want?"

Finn bowed slightly. "Thank you for answering our petition, Morrighu. My brother, twin of Niam, wishes to ask you questions."

Owain nodded and knelt on one knee. "Please, Morrighu. I need help in finding out the reasons for vampires here within this world."

Her hair brushed her face as she shook her head. “There is nothing about vampires which I need to discuss with you, Owain. Don’t you know enough with what you’ve become?”

Owain gritted his teeth. This wasn’t going how he planned, but he needed to know the truth. “I know that it wasn’t one god alone who created vampires, but a coalition of gods, including Sekhmet.”

Morrigu’s hand shot out, slapping Owain across the face. “You know nothing, fallen Druid! Nothing at all, do you understand me?”

Their eyes met and in hers were a cost most terrible. Would he risk the punishment? “I know more than you wish I did, Morrigu. I know the story from Sekhmet’s high priestess and fellow vampire. I know the Chinese and Japanese vampire myths and how they came to be, I know about the *baobhan sith*, Morrigu. I know your love for spilt blood and the trail leads across the water to where the most bloodthirsty of the gods ever were. The answers I seek are in Mexico.”

He felt her anger before she touched him. When she did, he hadn’t expected that she’d hit him in the chest with her dagger. “Listen to me, fallen, disgraced Druid. You will cease this before something happens. Do you understand me.”

“No, I don’t. Tell me why I should stop? I am not trying to get rid of vampires, but to give those who were wrongly turned a chance to become human again. Is that wrong, oh goddess of war and death?” Owain panted, his body trembling in pain as his hands wrapped around her neck.

Her boot connected with his genitals, causing him to let go of her. Gasping for breath, he stepped back and pulled out her dagger. After tossing it on the ground, Owain fell on both knees, holding his chest where the blood leaked out between his fingers. “Damn you, Morrigu, for this. Why can’t you stop being a high and mighty goddess and answer the damn questions, so I could stop, if it was logical? Did you stab Colette’s best friend, too? Are you going to kill everyone who questions you on this? Or are you going to grow up one day, Goddess?”

The woman advanced on him, lifting him by the shoulders. Her breath was steamy hot against his clammy skin. “You are being obnoxious, Owain Maraigh. You are meddling in something you know nothing about. How dare you judge me when you don’t know what I live with or what I deal with daily?”

Another hand reached up and touched hers. “Morrigu, listen to him. Don’t you hear? He’s asking you to explain. To stop being the remote goddess that you’ve become and to give him knowledge so he can get your side of the story. Help us to understand why you insist on him giving up his years of research.”

“What right --”

“You changed him, knowing his nature. You owe him that much; you owe because of how many of your people were wrongfully killed and more because of the nature of some

vampires who were wrongly made.” Finn spoke with a low, firm tone. “Mighty Morrighu, he’s not calling your actions into question, but trying to find a way to counter the wrongs done by vampires who aren’t loyal, who aren’t like us, who revel in killing. To give normal life to those who weren’t given a choice in becoming a vampire, which is a choice denied many who are unsuited for vampire life.”

Owain dropped to the ground, gasping in pain. “He’s right, Morrighu. That’s all I meant. I need to know how the process was started, the area of change, so I can help others. Not myself, I enjoy being a vampire too much to ever be completely mortal again, plus mine is a cursing. But there are others, innocents who never asked for the change, who fight against evil in their own way and never deserved to be changed thusly.”

“Are your words and his true?” Morrighu asked, her fingers flexing in warning.

“Yes! I tell you, Morrighu, I’d never have asked for an audience on sacred ground if it wasn’t with honorable intentions!” Owain grunted while he pressed harder against his wound.

The goddess knelt beside him, her hands covering over his. “Move your hands, Owain Maraigh. Let me fix my error,” she whispered. Their gazes locked as his hands moved away. “I’m amazed at the damage you allowed done to your body, Owain.”

Owain chuckled weakly. “I don’t think it was a matter of allowing it, it was a completely unexpected move on your behalf. Plus, you’re damn quicker than I am.”

Morrighu grinned. “That’s what happens when you’re the goddess of war. You learn how to move fast, my fallen *droi*. Now let me concentrate a moment.” Her eyes closed, her breathing became slow and even. Warmth filled her hands and a concentrated red glow emitted from them. After a few moments, her eyes snapped open. “There. Healed, but you’ll always carry the scar.”

Owain looked down where she had touched. The wound wasn’t bleeding but was closed and newly healed. Carefully, he took a deep breath and only winced slightly. “Thank you, Morrighu. You punctured my lung enough that I wouldn’t have made it to any hospital.”

“Only the fact you serve me as you do kept you alive.” Her voice was neutral sounding now. Neither hate nor any emotion filled her lilting voice. “Sit down my *droi* and let’s speak of your questions for a brief time.”

Owain plopped on the ground and Finn sat beside him. Morrighu sat in front of them, her sword sitting across her lap. At that moment, Owain realized how lucky he had been. He hadn’t realized she was wearing her sword. *Yeah, dog meat I’d have been had she run me through with that. There wouldn’t have been a second chance. Ugh.*

Morrighu gestured, her slim fingers forming various shapes, bringing forth images, though they were opaque. Softly, she revealed to them what she knew. “There was a time when vampires were less known in the world. Hell, each of us in the various pantheons had vampires created for different purposes and only used when necessary. Yet there was a problem none of us had foreseen. None of us except those who resided in Mesoamerica.”

Finn spoke. "The Aztec gods?"

The goddess nodded, shifting the scene to include snippets of vampires throughout the world, not just Mesoamerica. "Yes, as well as the Mayan gods. Though vampire legends can be found anywhere in the world, there are two main areas regarding their origins. Eastern Europe and the blood shedding in Mesoamerica."

Owain nodded. "That matches what I've discovered. Some of the African and Caribbean myths are quite detailed and different from most others."

"Yes, they were some of the last to come aboard the coalition."

"Coalition?" Finn interrupted. "You mean that you all came together on things?"

Morrigu sighed. "Yes, we did. The hows and whys are long lost, but what was important was that vampires lived, some good, some bad, but by the wildness in their creations, there were many aspects that could cause problems for mankind."

"Like the way vampires were made," Owain whispered.

"Yes. So, a few of us gathered at a sacred place and, amid a blood offering, sealed into existence the three known types of vampires, as well as specific laws governing their creation, destruction, and abilities." Morrigu rocked on her heels a bit. "It was unlike anything the world had ever seen. Many of us gathered together, from the Japanese gods, Kali from India, through Cizin and others."

"Who is Xilan, then?" Owain asked softly. "He was mentioned in a few ancient manuscripts, but no one speaks about him, except among the vampires."

Morrigu looked away, her sudden quietness unnerving to both Druids. Finally, when she spoke, it was almost too quiet to be heard clearly, though in Owain's brain, it thrummed like blood. "He is Lord God of the Vampires. I cannot tell you more, due to the blood oaths taken."

"Thank you, Morrigu. Is there a way of curing vampirism in those who were made without consent?"

"I'm not sure, Owain. It's never come up before the coalition. And in the end, all decisions go to Xilan." Morrigu looked at the sky. "Please, if you value anything, including your possible freedom from the curse, don't search any further. I'm telling you this because there are things mortals aren't meant to know."

Finn placed a hand on Owain's shoulder. "I know what you're gonna say, *deárthair*. Though I agree, we have to take into account that our Patroness knows more than we do on this issue."

"But what of those unjustifiably made, Morrigu? What can be done to help them?" Owain begged. "I just want to be able to offer them a chance. That's all and to understand their vampire natures, if they choose to remain that way."

The goddess wouldn't look at either Druid, her gaze directed out toward the west. "I am only one member of the coalition and again, the only one who supercedes us is Lord Xilan, Owain. I wish I could help."

"Perhaps he'll help me."

"Don't be sure about that, Owain. He's jealous of his creatures."

"Vampires are *not* creatures!" Owain growled. "I know you mean well by this. I thank you, Morrigu, but I can't leave people with no option to becoming a vampire without their consent."

"Then take care that you don't lose what you love most, Owain. Because that could be the price for your wanting to help others."

Owain hesitated. "My brothers can care for themselves."

Purple met dark brown. "That's not what I meant and you know it."

"It's not a done deal, as you know."

"No, it's not. But make sure it doesn't become an impossibility."

Morrigu stood up, the men rising with her movement. When she looked at them and raised her hands, both men bowed. She laid hands upon them both. "May this night give you insight into your hearts, your souls, and the future beyond. Seek to the land in the west upon the temple of sacrifice." Then she turned and walked through the portal. "*Bendithion, droi.* May the answers given help you in some manner. Die well, if need be."

When the glow faded, Finn turned to Owain. "We must finish the ritual." Together they spoke the closing words and thanks. As they spoke the last words, both men collapsed on the ground, their breathing coming in short breaths. Even with the psychic energy they had expended, dealing with all those emotions and more, the cost was high.

Owain felt a wrist at his mouth. "Drink, *deártháir*. You need sustenance after what you've done."

"But Donal --"

"But nothing, drink dammit." Donal placed his wrist against Owain's mouth again. "I trust you won't bleed me to death."

Reluctantly, Owain bit into the wrist, letting the blood well up in his mouth. Tasting the warmth, the infusion of heat and life, he suckled a bit more, savoring the taste of magickal blood. Swallowing a few mouthfuls of the nourishing blood, he licked the marks he created in Donal's wrist. Pushing his brother's hand away, Owain sat up, feeling strength flow into his body. "*Go raibh maith agat, mo dheartháir.*"

"Anytime and no thanks are necessary. You'd have done the same for me," Donal said, sitting next to him. "What more can I do to help you?"

"Nothing. How's Finn?"

“*Sin ulle*, I’m fine,” Finn responded, pushing Shane away. “The question is, how real is your injury now we’re out of the Otherworld embrace?”

Owain patted where the dagger went in his chest. “It’s feeling like shite. So, yes, it’s real here and it’s left a mark, dammit. Does anyone know what time it is?”

“After midnight, boyo.” Shane looked. “We should be heading back. You’re leaving soon, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan. Now with the new information, I need to make some plans for my new assistant.”

Shane snorted while the other two looked at Owain. “I sincerely doubt that she’s going to just let you up and go without her, Owain,” Shane commented. “Yes, we could hear some of what was said, but not as clear as you both probably did.”

Donal nodded, helping bandage his brother up with the portable medic kit. “She seemed quite pissed at first. Why is she so determined not to let you find out the origins of vampires?”

“Because the origins are shrouded a lot more than anyone realizes. Plus, something happened that changed things.”

Donal stopped. “That sounds ominous.”

“Yeah. I need to rethink a few things before I make a mad dash to Mexico.” Owain stood uncertainly on his feet. “Who’s driving me to the hotel?”

“I will. Finn, will you be all right? Shane, you take care of Finn. I’ll call you tomorrow, big brother,” Donal said with a nod.

Carefully, Owain and Donal made their way down the trail and toward the Powerscourt house. Once there, they negotiated past the Bamberg gate. Owain stopped and leaned against the stone edifice. “Hold on, Donal.”

“Your wound hurting you?” Donal’s eyes were full of concern. Owain knew this was his time to be more ghostly, so walking the terrain had been easier for Donal than for him, but they had covered it fairly quickly with Donal leading the way.

“Just a bit. I’m not bad though. I’m worried about Colette and how this might affect her.”

“Your wound or the warning?”

“The warning.”

Both men remained quiet as the night surrounded them completely. Donal laid his hand on Owain’s shoulder. “Do you love her?”

“Does it matter?” Owain asked, his voice harsh with emotion. “The curse doesn’t specify that; it specifies she has to love me unconditionally. Something I don’t know.”

The blonde-haired brother nodded. “You’re in love with her. *Tuigim*. So, do you tell her what Morrigu warned or do you leave her behind?”

"I'm not sure, Donal. *Dar leat*, which would be better? Telling her what could happen and facing the fact she might die or leaving her behind and knowing I might never have her love that way either?"

"I don't envy you the choice, Owain. I really don't. As it is, I know what it's like to hope. In my case, it's a useless proposition, since the likelihood of meeting anyone who has the mark of Morrigu is slim. But there was a woman ..."

"Pretty?"

"I'm not sure, but I'd say yes. I met her briefly at a Yuletide party in London. There was something very special about her, but I'm not putting hope to trust in it being real. I just wish I could find her and figure out why she got to me that night." Donal looked at the night sky, filled with stars only as the new moon was at its zenith.

"*De bharr* that you felt something for her?"

"Yes, on all accounts. We merged in a daydream while I kissed her. There is something about her that pulls me."

"If you know anything about her or can find out about her, see about finding her when you get some time." Owain sighed. "It's time we get going. Colette will either be sleeping and waiting for me or up and waiting for me."

Silently, they both headed to Donal's car. The only noise during the drive back to Dublin was the radio playing traditional Celtic music. Any conversation was aborted due to their own private and personal feelings about the evening's happenings. On some level, Owain wanted to doubt it happened, but knew it was real. There was no way to deny what had happened, not with his healing injury. What he worried about most was how Colette would react to the information. Donal pulled up to the front area of the Alexander Hotel. Both brothers embraced. "*Buíochas*, Donal."

"No reason to thank me for helping out my brother. Go get some rest and in the morning, you can tell Colette what you feel is necessary. I think, though, she might surprise you."

"Perhaps. *Oiche mhaith, mo dheartháir*."

Donal waved. "Sleep well yourself. Take care." With those parting words, he sped off into the night. Owain stood there for a moment, inhaling the night air, shivering at the chilliness that now seemed to envelop him. With a heavy sigh, he went inside, nodded at the night clerk, then headed up to his room.

Unlocking the door, he stepped inside the dimly lit room. The light from the bathroom shone softly in the room, highlighting Colette's sleeping countenance. His heart constricted seeing her so at peace. He didn't want anything to mar their relationship, but it might not be an option the way events were shaping up.

Carefully Owain undressed, then crawled into the huge bed, snuggling closer to Colette. In her sleep, she reached out to him and he enveloped her in his embrace.

“Mionnaigh mé, Col. We’ll get through this somehow and not lose what we mean to each other.” His lips brushed her forehead causing her to tighten her grip around his waist. With a sigh, Owain slid into an uneasy sleep, hoping that come morning, things would be better.

Chapter Nine

“And you think you can just dismiss me because of what *might* happen? Are you that fucking stupid?” Colette yelled at Owain two nights later.

Owain looked impassively at her, no emotion showing. For the past two days, he had wooed her, made love to her, no ... convinced her that there was such a thing as white knights, and now, now he had the nerve to tell her he wasn’t bringing her to Mexico in order to protect her from what might be there. She knew he was hiding something else besides Morrighu’s warning, but nothing she did made him open his mouth about what it was.

Her heart ached inside. The past two days had shown her that it was okay to trust and let herself feel deeply for this man. Part of her knew she was already in love with him, but there was the whole thing of the curse, the requirements to break it, and the truth about whether or not she could honestly accept him as a vampire. It was a lot to ask of a woman to be the one to completely trust and accept him for what he was. What if he wasn’t accepting of her and her life? Wasn’t that just as bad? How much was it worth to be the one to break the curse? Was it really worth it?

“Well?” Her voice broke with emotion.

“I figured it was a rhetorical question considering you’ve been ranting at me for the last hour. Are you done with your tirade so I can explain what I was hoping to do, since I don’t want to risk your life?”

“You think *that* was a tirade? You’ve not seen tirade, buddy!”

Owain jerked her against him, tilted up her chin and hoarsely whispered. “Don’t you get how fucking precious you are to me? Don’t you get that the thought of you dead and beyond my reach terrifies me beyond anything I could ever endure? Don’t you get that I would keep my fucking curse to make sure you’re safe?” With that, his lips crushed against

hers while his hands touched her back, her breasts, between her thighs, touching, stroking, demonstrating his feelings, even though he might not show them on his face.

Colette couldn't help but respond to the passion in his touch. Her fingers undid his shirt, caressing his warm flesh, gently touching the wound he took defending his position against the goddess he and she both served. Her mouth slid over his chin, her tongue tasting his salty skin, roughened by his stubble. "Oh, Owain, don't you realize I'll worry just as much for your safety?"

Her lips suckled his neck, her hands undoing his pants, shoving them down over his hips. "My Celtic warrior, the things you do to me."

"No, the things you do to me, *mé grá*." Owain's hands tugged at her now opened shirt, sliding it off her arms, leaving only her lacy bra. His eyes seemed filled with a desperation she shared.

"No more words, O. Just love me, please."

As Evanescence played on the music video show in the background, Colette dropped to her knees, her mouth caressing her way down Owain's belly. "Save me from the dark," she sang softly as her lips wrapped around his hard cock. Taking him in deeply, she savored his taste, his essence. Her tongue swirled around him, their moans joining as one. Without stopping, her free hand cupped his scrotum, gently squeezing and teasing.

Owain's fingers fisted in Colette's dark hair, guiding her to what pleased him most. When her teeth gently scraped the underside of his cock, he shuddered in ecstasy. "Oh gods, Col, you're more than enough woman for a man."

"But I only need one man, O. You," she whispered back, her mouth going down on him once more. *I love you, Owain Maraigh, more than I can ever reveal. I'd give my soul for yours easily to free you from the curse, to give us a chance, but please don't ask me to stay behind. Please don't.*

As the song faded and another began, Colette slowly rose up, her body sliding against Owain's. "Come to bed, O."

Her hand slid possessively over his cock, guiding him to the bed, laying him down. She stripped off the rest of her clothes and positioned herself over him. Her fingers guided her and slowly she sank on his length. "Owain ... oh gods, yes," she hissed in pleasure.

Slowly they rocked together, their bodies moving in an ancient rhythm perfected once and never having to be rethought. His mouth claimed one of her nipples as his hands massaged her breasts. "*Mé póg tá brionn* because it's beautiful, so luscious, so delightful. Your nipple *taítníonn le, pléisiúrs* me with its tightness," he moaned as their bodies continued the slow, languid pace.

"Stay with me, my dearest Owain," Colette panted, her body rocking, hips grinding as their pleasure built to a higher crescendo. She ran her fingers through his hair lovingly. Her smile held a hint of sadness. "Love me, *mé droi grá*."

Owain released her breasts, wrapping his arms around her waist, then suddenly rolled over so he was on top of her. "Damn straight I'm going to love you, Colette Wylde," he growled. His mouth crushed hers; his hands stroked her cheeks.

His mouth slid over her breasts, each lovingly caressed as his cock filled her with slow, long thrusts. Then he slid lower, his cock sliding out of her and against her thigh. She whimpered with need. Her eyes were barely open, but she saw the wicked look on Owain's face.

"O?"

"Scream for me, my Col. Come for me," he purred as his mouth captured her clit, his teeth gently rasping the sensitive nub.

"Owain!" Her body bucked as he continued the assault on her clitoris, his fingers sliding into her wet, dripping pussy. Her senses were overwhelmed as his breath tingled over her sensitive folds and his fingers explored, thrust, and caressed her inner muscles. "Please, oh gods, please Owain, now," she gasped, her hands fisting on the bedsheets.

His fingers slid into her pussy hard as his mouth suckled on her clit, tossing her beyond the edge of reason. Her hands released the bedsheets, grabbing at him while her eyes closed as her climax rolled through her body, taking her heart with it. "Owain, Owain, Owain, O, O!" she screamed as her body bowed under his touch.

Owain kept stroking her body, not letting the climax end too suddenly. When her body finally stopped shuddering in pleasure, his tongue licked her slit slowly, deeply, taking in her precious juices. Carefully, he slid her legs up over his shoulders as he leaned forward, his body grinding against hers. With one hand, he guided the head of his cock to her wet core, then slid home once again. A low moan tore through the room as he moved with slow, deliberate strokes. Out almost all the way, then back in with one long, hard thrust. Slowly pull out, then back in. Finally, his body demanded that he finish it.

His pace increased as sweat sheened their skin, and their breaths became shallow with their bodies joining together so intimately. He loved this woman beneath him. He would do anything to keep her safe, anything to make sure that she was happy. But some part of him worried that she'd be at risk if she went with him to Chichen Itza. If there was any chance of losing her, he'd give up this quest than hurt this woman beneath him.

Her fingers raked his ass cheeks as her body tightened in warning. Knowing she was close to coming with him, Owain let himself go. "Come with me, Colette. I beg you," he whispered into her ear.

Together they hit the pinnacle, their bodies and souls joined in that moment. The love both felt, but wouldn't speak of, was there without any more barriers. Slowly, they both started to return to their own bodies. Owain was the first to catch his breath, sliding off of her, and cuddling her in his arms, his lips kissing her cheek. "You mean so much to me."

"And you to me, Owain." Her hand stroked back his hair from his face. "Sleep, we'll talk more in the morning."

Owain nodded, his eyes closing. He would fight for this woman; he would keep her safe. Perhaps one day he'd realize he wasn't doing it just for himself, but for her. He loved her enough to walk alone, but he also loved her enough to hope that one day she'd see what cost it would've been to them both if he took her along.

The television played in the background as Colette curled against Owain's warmth. Her heart pounded still after their lovemaking. Beyond that, she knew it thrummed with what she was going to do. But honestly, what choice did she have? Her lips brushed against his and her eyes filled with tears.

"I love you, Owain. Totally, unconditionally, but I need you to need me just as much as I need you. To know I'd protect you just like you're trying to protect me. Together we're stronger than if we were alone." Her words were so low; she knew he wasn't hearing them.

She snuggled with him until he fell asleep. She dozed on and off for a while, then carefully roused herself from her meditative sleep.

Carefully, she moved herself out of the bed. Colette quickly washed up and dressed, careful not to wake Owain. Her heart ached for what she was about to do, but she could see no other way. The past two nights they had made love and she knew Owain had barely slept. The things he had kept from her had eaten at him, keeping him from sleep. Now, he was sleeping deeply and it would help for what she was going to do.

Grabbing her pack and one small suitcase filled with only clothing essentials, Colette stealthily left the room. Dialing Eileen, she explained the need for swiftness. Once that call was done, she made two more, the final one being to a friend of a friend.

"Kymaera? This is Colette Wylde, I'm a friend of Riana's and Cylene's."

"What can I do for you, Helsinger friend?" The feminine voice was accented, reminding her of how global the paranormal communities were.

"I need a place to stay near Chichen Itza. Preferably not a hotel, if you understand my meaning." Colette hated to ask for help, but if Owain was even partially correct, she needed to be circumspect and avoid the hotels for now.

"When will you arrive? I'm near there right now, heading out of town in a couple of weeks."

"I'm on my way to the airport to get the first available flight. I'll probably be landing at Mexico City."

"So, we're looking at an ETA of tomorrow sometime, late afternoon. Do you know how to get to Chichen Itza?"

"I've got maps and directions from Mexico City to there. Why?"

"When you arrive, go straight to the parking lot, pay the fee, and go into the area. Make your way to either Kukulcán's pyramid or to the ball field. I'll find you there."

"You don't need to do that, Kymaera. I know that as head of your house, you're damn busy."

"Exactly. But somehow, I doubt you're coming here for pleasure. As a courtesy between our roles and for the Council, let me at least give you hospitality." The voice was pleasant, soothing, and convincing with the slight lilt. Colette thought about how much she knew of Kymaera, head of the vampire House of Sekhmet. There was no choice.

"Okay. I appreciate this. I'll call you when I land at Mexico City."

"Sounds like a plan, catch ya later then. Adios!"

Colette stepped outside the hotel and Eileen pulled up in her car.

"Hop in, I take it there's a reason for this single flight out of Ireland?" Eileen gave Colette a once-over look.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, if you don't, I'll call Riana. She'll set you straight."

"Fuck no. She'll make my life a living hell." Colette stiffly explained about what had happened, the fight, her thoughts, and her plan to be met by the head of Sekhmet once she was at the Mayan ancient city.

Eileen said nothing as she made her way through downtown. Only when they were close to their destination did she respond. "Personally, I do get why you're going this part alone, but I have a real bad feeling about it. How much can we really trust Kymaera?"

"Riana trusts her."

"Riana is not you or me. Riana has her own way of dealing with people who betray her, and trust me, it's not joyful. The question is whether or not you're playing into the vampire coalition's plans." Eileen's fingers tapped at the steering wheel. "I don't like it, Colette."

"It's not a matter of liking it or not. We need the information, not just for Owain, but also for the nemeton. Do you deny that this kind of information needs to be preserved, protected, and kept in case of an emergency?"

"No, that's what makes this a tough call, Col. Personally, I don't like you going alone. I can't leave because of my studies. Plus, it's almost the equinox, Colette. Something about Chichen Itza deals with it, but I can't remember. It's not my specialty," Eileen apologized.

"It's okay. The Mayans had a way of aligning their pyramids to solstices and equinoxes. The pyramid of Kukulcán is one of them. Though there's no chance of seeing the snake enter or leave the pyramid because that only happens on the solstices, I don't think I'll be at risk. Plus, Kymaera isn't an enemy."

"No, she's a vampire with attitude. Granted she owes our nemeton some favors, but I still consider her a risk."

"Agreed, Eileen. Listen to me, come the morning, call Owain and let him know I'm okay and that I'll be in touch with him once I'm done with my research. Tell him I've gone to see an old friend until this is over."

"Dr. Medallano's wife?"

“Yes. I know I’ll be seeing her on the way to Chichen Itza. Hopefully, she’s got more information for me.”

“Will do. Anything personal you want me to tell him?” Eileen hugged her friend once she pulled over to the drop-off area. “Anything at all?”

“Tell him I love him enough to know I can’t be left behind like an incapable person.”

“Will do. Be careful and call for backup if needed. I think one of ours is in Cancun vacationing.”

“I’ll send up the flag if it’s needed.” Colette hugged the young woman back and got out of the car. “Thanks for the ride. Get some sleep and tell Riana that she’s not the only one with adventures to be had.”

“Ha. I’ll let her know only after I tell Owain. You know she’ll call to kick your arse otherwise.”

“Indeed. Take care, wish me well.” Colette closed the door and waved. Then she walked inside the airport.

Eileen watched then dug out her mobile phone. Dialing a number memorized by heart, she waited until it was picked up. “Life just got complicated, Riana.”

Chapter Ten

Listening to local Mexican radio, Colette drove toward the outskirts of Mexico City. Having slept most of the plane flight, she hadn't returned either of the calls left on her voice mail. Knowing that both Owain and Riana were pissed at her, she figured it was best that she didn't incite a riot with her idea. However, that was part of the problem, as she wasn't quite sure how to execute her idea. It all rested on Tony's wife. Once she had his information, then it could be adjusted and other problems taken into account.

Her cell phone rang and she glanced at the number calling her. It was Tony's wife, Cicely. Picking up the phone, she pressed a button. "Hello?"

"Colette? This is Cicely."

"Great to hear from you, Cicely. I should be there in fifteen minutes. Anything happening?"

"Nope. I have the data you requested from Tony's files. Are you in any trouble?"

"What makes you think that?" Colette made a left-hand turn, the car eating up miles.

"Just the way your last phone call sounded."

"Plus, Riana called you."

"Yes, she did." Cicely hesitated a moment. "This is about the discovery of the sacred texts, isn't it?"

"What sacred texts? Riana didn't mention anything about sacred texts."

There was a slight pause. "She doesn't know. Well, she didn't until this morning."

"Shit. How pissed is she with you now?"

"She's threatened to come and take me and the boys away from Mexico for protection."

Colette paused and whistled. That was her sister, her best friend in action for protecting her family and friends. Whatever was on the texts was enough to make Riana overreact. "I take it that I'll be given the papers of the text and translation then."

"Yes. What no one realizes is that Tony took the texts home. He knew that they needed to be protected more than the usual amount done by any museum."

"This is not making things any easier. Why isn't a museum the place to protect the texts?"

"Because they show the existence of vampires and of a god named Xilan who can be reached at Chichen Itza on only four days of the year."

"Aw, shit. This is getting worse and worse. Look Cicely, let me hang up. I'll be there in five minutes and you can fill me in on the details. But one last thing, in the texts, does it say what Xilan does?"

"Yes, it does. He's the god of vampires."

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I'll see you in five." Colette hung up the cell phone and thought about these new revelations. Right about now, she could use Owain at her side, but there was no way in hell it would make this any easier beyond having someone to lean on.

* * * * *

Owain hung up the phone cursing in Gaelic. "I cannot believe that woman!"

Shane stood at the door. "Which one?"

"Huh?"

"Colette, her Irish friend, Eileen, or the woman you were speaking with on the phone?"

"Yes!" Owain packed his bags, tossing Colette's spare bag on the bed.

"Seriously, Owain, you okay? What's going on?"

Owain sighed and kicked the bed. "Colette is in Mexico and heading to Chichen Itza on her own. There were sacred texts found nearby the area recently by Dr. Medallano, and they deal with Xilan and vampires."

"No fucking way!" Shane exclaimed. "What are you going to do?"

"My flight leaves in two hours. I can only hope that I can get to Chichen Itza quickly and stop Colette from doing anything foolish."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Take care of the bill. Use the main account for it. I need to get out of here. Let Finn, Donal, and Miach know the latest."

"Miach is going to roar over this."

"Can't be any worse than listening to Dr. Riana Sinclair bitch about the whole situation. She does remind me of Miach in many ways, though." Owain ran his fingers through his hair. When he woke up, he had thought Colette had gone for a walk to think about things. It wasn't until he saw her bags gone and received Eileen's and then Riana's calls that he realized the truth of what was going on.

"Whatever you need, I'll help out with, *múinteoir*."

"Thanks, Shane. I'll call you later once I'm in flight." Owain patted Shane on the shoulder, then made his way downstairs to the car. Once everything was stowed away, he headed toward the airport. Luckily he had bought his ticket online, so it was waiting for him. He cursed that the Concorde still wasn't running. That could've cut his flight time in half or more. Pulling into the VIP parking, he left the car there for Shane or Patrick to pick up. Rushing, Owain went through airport security quickly, picked up his ticket and made his way to the VIP lounge area.

Once settled in the lounge, he picked up the phone and dialed a number that he had received from Riana. He really didn't like the problems this invoked, but he was without a choice in the matter. A soft feminine voice answered with, "Hello?"

"May I speak with Kymaera, please?"

"This is Kymaera. Who am I speaking to?"

"Owain Maraigh. Dr. Sinclair gave me your number. She said that you might have information regarding Colette Wylde." Owain bit back a sharp retort. He was sure that Kymaera knew well and good who he was and why he was calling.

"Yes, Riana mentioned you'd be calling. What can I do for you?" Now her tone sounded cautious. He needed her help, not her suspicion.

"Prevent Colette from opening the portal to Xilan at Chichen Itza."

"I see." The voice hardened. "May I ask why I should obey your demand on this?"

"Because I'm part of House Morigu, third rank. I'm also working with Ola Mahdi."

The pause was filled with many emotions, he sensed, only one of them being curiosity. He wasn't going to give in and fill the silence. Finally, the voice on the other end spoke.

"Then I'll help you as I can. Why do you feel it's dangerous for her to go to Chichen?"

"This is hard to explain to an unbeliever, Kymaera. My patron goddess warned me that if she goes there, she might be killed and her death cause more pain for mankind."

The sigh on the other end was heavy. "She is on her way here. I am meeting her at the site itself. I don't think she knows what to do or expect yet. How long until you arrive?"

He checked his ticket before answering her. "I'll be there tomorrow, early morning."

"I can put her off until tomorrow night before she gets raring to do something foolish."

Owain grunted. "Good luck."

“She’s part of *Saille nemeton* and mortal. Did you really think she’d have considered all consequences? She’s scared that something will happen and she’ll lose everything, from what I could sense while talking with her earlier. It makes us do desperate things, love and fear do.”

Startled, Owain replied, “Yes, it does. Sometimes to the detriment of all else, if we’re not careful. Even when we’ve seen all the consequences, sometimes we choose the wrong thing because it’s the safest path, not the best one.”

“Wise words from a wise man.”

“No, from a man guilty of doing just that.”

“And I’m a woman who’s just as guilty and with no way of making recompense, Owain Maraigh. I shall keep Colette from doing anything stupid until you get here. You have my bond.”

“Kymaera, *go raibh maith agat*. I appreciate this. I’m hoping once things are settled, you and I can take the time to acquaint ourselves. I know that House Morrigu doesn’t have much to do with the rest of the vampire world.”

“It would be nice to begin bringing House Morrigu into the fold instead of being outsiders.” A smile shone through over the line. “Truly, that would be great, Owain. Call me when you get into Mexico, and we’ll go from there.”

“Will do, Kymaera, and thanks once again for your help. Just be careful. We have some problems with Taranis and his minions.”

“They won’t stray near Chichen. No one dares risk the wrath of the Mayan gods.”

“That makes one less issue to worry about.” The overhead speakers announced his flight. “My flight’s been called. I’ll call you later on. Until then, Kymaera.”

“May the night provide you cover and bless you in the full light of the moon.”

“May the dark moon glow in your eyes and your soul be your own.” Owain hung up his phone and headed toward his gate. Handing over his ticket, he thanked the airline attendant and made his way onto the plane, nodding at his fellow first class passengers.

Sitting back in his chair, Owain fastened his seat belt and prayed the flight would be on time or faster. The vibration of his cell phone captured his attention.

“Hello?”

“What the fuck is going on, *deárthair*?” Miach demanded.

“Joy, I should’ve known you’d call. Things are going on. I’m getting to the bottom of it all.”

“By having our Patroness slay you for questioning her over things she commanded you to drop? Is that what you call getting to the bottom of things?”

“Miach, listen to me and listen well. I had to do what was needed to get these answers. Do you know there is *no cure* for any of our conditions? Did you know that?”

Miach paused and Owain mentally counted to fifteen, knowing that it took his brother that long to regain control of his temper. "Are you sure?"

"That's what Morrighu hinted at and what I'm aiming to find out. Do you realize what that means to the innocent victims, Miach? It's an unacceptable answer and one I plan on rectifying in some manner."

"Just be careful, Owain. Niam won't like being the only living half of twins if you get yourself killed."

"I'll take care, *mionnaigh mé*, Miach. Look, we're getting ready for takeoff; I need to shut this down. Expect a phone call once this is all over, all right?"

"Until later then. *Slán*." The dial tone rang in Owain's ear. Shutting off his phone, he took a proffered blanket and closed his eyes. Sleep, he needed sleep in order to handle what would be coming for them both. He only hoped that Kymaera would keep Colette safe until he got there.

* * * * *

"Kymaera?" Colette looked at the blonde woman with some trepidation. She moved with an unnatural grace and dark eyes that hunted the area.

"Yes. Colette?" The woman extended her hand. They shook. "Good to meet you. If you want to look around, I can tell you a bit about Chichen. Otherwise, we can head for the place you'll be staying while you're here."

"This place is huge. To be honest, I'm feeling a bit paranoid after my visit with Cicely. Can we go to the house so I can rest, get something to eat, and ask some questions?"

"Sure, we can talk a bit while we walk."

Kymaera spoke about the history of Chichen Itza. She spoke of the time when the Mayans abandoned the city and the Toltecs briefly lived there until the return of the Mayans around 1000 AD. Pointing out the Temple of the Warrior as well as the Kukulcán pyramid, she went on describing the two *cenotes*, or wells, that were so important to the Mayans who lived there. Pointing out the various points known and little known except to historians and archaeologists, Kymaera helped Colette understand some of the history of the sacred place.

"What about Caracol?" Colette asked. "Was it only an observatory?"

"From what we know, yes. But did they sometimes observe other things? We're not sure. I wish there were more notes left by the ancients, but there aren't. How do you like this place?"

Colette rubbed her arms. It was warm here in Mexico, but there was a lingering sense of darkness about this place that made her feel uncomfortable, eager to continue her walking. Her body's internal alarms sounded, encouraging her to leave before anything harmful happened to her. "It's unusual. It's not like the Celtic places I've been to or like some

of the Native American sanctuaries. There's a bit of darkness here that I've not seen elsewhere."

"You're a sensitive then. Has Riana tested your sensitivity to various sacred areas?"

"She has. I am about a three on the scale. Why?"

"Some humans are of use to the vampire community and their heightened psychic skills help them to integrate and work well with vampires. You seem to be one of those people. Have you worked with a vampire before?"

Colette hesitated. She didn't want to share Owain, but knowing the vampire community, Kymaera probably was aware of the man's existence. "Yes, I worked with Owain Maraigh, a Celtic vampire."

"Good doctor, too. He's trying to help the vampire and human races." Kymaera looked around the parking lot as they went through the fencing area where many people sold replicas and goods of the Mayan ruins. "Where are you parked?"

"About thirty yards that way," Colette pointed out. "Where are you?"

"Not far from you actually. Let's go." Kymaera led the way, speaking to a couple of Mayans in their native tongue.

"You speak Mayan," Colette commented with surprise tingeing her tone.

"I speak many tongues. When you've been alive as long as I have, you learn to speak the language of the people where you live." Kymaera smiled to soften the harshness of her tone. "I've been a vampire for a very long time. Long enough that even the Maraighs acknowledge my presence."

"But you only look like you're in your mid-twenties!"

"Thank you for the compliment. Why don't you follow me and we'll get you home." Kymaera waved as she climbed on her Harley Davidson motorcycle. Colette unlocked her rental car, climbed in and started the engine. Giving Kymaera a thumbs up, she waited for the vampire to lead the way.

Once they left the crowded parking lot, Colette let out a sigh of relief. Though she enjoyed looking at the various ruins, there was something vaguely disturbing that lay beneath the feeling of history. It wasn't the idea of sacrifices; she'd been to other places that had that. It wasn't because of Choc Mool, the Mayan god. Some other entity's menacing demeanor lay beneath the beauty of Chichen Itza, and it made her nervous. Though she tried to pin down what exactly made her uneasy, no one thing stood out. In fact, there were a few things, like the sensation of being watched, the sense that many of the vampires she sensed would willingly kill anyone in their way, the way the weather even seemed duller than normal at this time of year. Taken together with that menacing demeanor that she couldn't place, Colette was thrilled to be leaving the oppressive air that surrounded Chichen Itza.

Her phone rang and Colette ignored it. Now that she was here and had spent time talking to Cicely, she realized there was more going on than had been admitted to. The texts

had spoken of the vampire god and the yearly tribute as well as the various times of offering and requesting. Though she and Cicely didn't understand all of the Mayan hieroglyphs, just the feeling of magick was enough to make Colette wary.

She wasn't sure what she'd do, but somehow, at the equinox rising, she'd be on that pyramid. Her mind reeled with all the things she'd found out. She wanted nothing more than to hear Owain's voice, yet that wasn't going to happen. Not with how she'd left. *I love you, O. I do. Whatever happens, please know I do this out of love for you. To give us a chance to be together, not apart.*

Her phone rang again and after glancing at the caller ID, she decided to answer it. "Yes, Riana?"

"Why the hell did you leave your vampire sex god behind?"

"It doesn't matter, Ri. I'll get the information needed and handle what needs to be handled." Her voice grew cold. "Did Owain put you up to calling me and giving me a hard time?"

"No, I'm the one who called him. I can't believe you're running off like this with no fucking backup, Col. This is stupidity at its finest!"

"Thanks for being so damn understanding, Sis. I should've known it's okay for you to get your ass kicked, but not for me. Did I tread on your sacred territory?" Colette sarcastically retorted. There was a slight pause, then soft chuckling. "Well?"

"Is that what you really think or are you assuming, Col?" Riana's voice lost its harshness and there was a hint of something else instead. "Listen to me. This has nothing to do with you being unable to kick ass. It has everything to do with the fact that a mortal cannot stand up to a god alone. Not without risking their life. Are you willing to die for being hardheaded?"

"I'm not going to die. This is simply researching and asking some questions. Nothing more." Colette tamped down her reservations. "If it was anything else, you know I'd ask for help."

"Listen to me, sistermine. I know you say that, but I also know that on a whim you'd go off if you thought it was the right thing intuitively." A heavy sigh came over the slightly crackly phone line. "I'm not saying you're wrong, but I am saying that sometimes your heart moves faster than your logic does. Please do me a favor and don't go out to the pyramid without a vampire or another Druid with you."

"I will try not to, Ri. There is no rush in getting through anything." Colette hesitated slightly. "I spoke with Cicely. I have Tony's notes and a copy of the texts he found."

"And?"

"They speak of Xilan and how to open the portal between the Mayan Underworld and here. Something about him being an unspoken Lord of Xibalba."

"I see."

"Tony was killed by vampires."

"I see."

"Do you see, Riana? Or are you not getting the point?"

"Have you found the vampires in question?" Riana's voice lowered slightly. "Have you questioned the people who reported he was killed by vampires or is this supposition?"

"This is per Cicely and the reports from the Council."

"The Vampire Council? Who investigated?"

"Some guy named Jan."

"I see. I want copies of the reports. What about the official police reports?" Riana was now all business.

"I've got those, too."

"Get me names. Do *not* take the vampires out until I get confirmation, understand?"

"Is that an order?"

"If it means you'll obey -- then yes. There are things about Tony and Cicely that you don't know. Things that have to be dealt with delicately, even in the preternatural world," Riana explained while Colette clicked on the radio.

"Understood. Are things now cleared up between us?" Colette let her voice show her tiredness and emotional pain.

"Yes. They are. Just remember, Col, I'm not doing or asking this of you because I think you're incapable. I think you're more than capable, but I'm doing this so you don't lose yourself in the bloodletting. Think of the myths of Sekhmet and even of Morrigan. Please. Just don't get into the bloodlust."

"It's okay, Sis. I do understand. It's something that Davyd warned me about. That natural Helsingers are often a step from being as bad as those they hunt. I'll be careful. I'm not a callous murderer like those who killed my family."

"He wasn't lying about that. Those Helsingers who go over the edge are taken out, Sis. Completely and utterly." Riana swallowed audibly. "I don't want to lose you or have to ask someone to deal with you if you lose yourself, Col. I love you too much for that."

"Understood, and I promise it won't happen. Consider me warned and nervous about it, too." She watched Kymaera turn on her left turn signal. Looking at the small, unassuming home, Colette was concerned that it sat alone for many miles. "I best go. We're at our destination, and I need to sleep."

"Okay, be safe, and may the Goddess keep you safe in this endeavor."

"Love you and may your healing be blessed by the goddesses of Avalon." Colette clicked off the phone and pulled in behind Kymaera's bike. After turning off the motor, Colette grabbed her bags and got out of the car. The door shut with a loud slam and Kymaera chuckled.

"We're here. This is a safe house."

"Safe house for vampires or from vampires?" Colette looked around. "Some vampires don't necessarily like Helsingers."

"This is a safe zone for vampires, humans, Helsingers, and others. It has marks that are visible only to various preternaturals that anyone in this house is under the keeping of the gods and by the blood oaths. C'mon this way," she said, unlocking the door, tossing the keys back to Colette. "The house isn't huge, but it's clean, comfortable, and stocked with food."

"Then it's perfect. I don't need anything more than that. Will I be alone?" Colette's gaze took in the dusted furniture and the cleanliness of the small house. "This looks like it's got a couple of bedrooms."

"You're in here, if you wish. It's the largest bedroom." Kymaera turned on the light. "No one else is scheduled to be here. But on occasion we'll have a couple of people in one house, depending on the situations. However, you're only two miles from the nearest town, so it isn't too bad. No one I know has said anything about bringing anyone here, either."

"Great. Thanks so much for this, Kymaera." Colette dropped her bags and sat on the bed. She tried to stifle a yawn but couldn't. "Today has been unbearably long."

"Flying from Ireland to Mexico, driving a couple hundred miles, and on top of that, trying to figure out what's going on? Yeah, I'd believe it was too long." Kymaera smiled, her face looking younger than the many hundreds of years Colette knew her to be.

"I have a question, Kymaera, and I realize you might or might not know the answer. Riana said something about Helsingers being eliminated if they go into the bloodlust. Is this true?"

Something passed over Kymaera's features before they settled back into passivity. "It's true. There are those among the vampire community -- and trust me, the Helsingers are part of it -- who enforce the Vampire Codex. Those are laws that vampires, those who live among them, like the Helsingers, and those linked to them, live by. There are certain behaviours that are against the Codex. If a Helsinger delves into the bloodlust, killing for the sake of killing and not for a purposeful reason, then they're put on the hunted list and taken out."

"Who makes this decision?"

"The Council. Usually a friend or enemy lodges a complaint. It's investigated and then the order is executed. Sometimes it's shown to be a false charge; other times it's not. The person is asked to step down and back off. Sometimes that's not possible for them to do, thus they die. Does that answer your question?"

"Yeah." Colette lay back on the bed and yawned again. "I'm really truly exhausted."

Kymaera nodded. "I don't blame you. Why don't you take a nap? While you sleep, I'll prepare you some food so you can just heat it up and eat later on. I'll go walk around the perimeter before I take off for the night."

Colette's eyes widened. "You're not staying?"

“Tonight? No. I have some issues to take care of in Cancun, but I will be back by morning, okay?”

“Yeah, you’re sure I’ll be okay?”

Kymaera smiled. “Yeah, I’m positive you’ll be fine. You’re under my House protection. No one would dare harm you here.”

Colette nodded. “Okay. I do appreciate this. I know I probably sound like a broken record, but it’s just so damn hard to know who or what to trust when things aren’t normal anymore.”

A chuckle emanated from deep within Kymaera. “Oh, honey, you just don’t know. Nothing is ever normal once you’ve been brought into the world of the preternatural. You probably should’ve stayed with the Maraighs. They have an ability to make the paranormal normal around them.”

“You know I was with Owain?” Colette asked suspiciously.

“Sweetheart, gossip travels faster among vampires than it ever does around mortals. Plus, you have a singing bird of Rhiannon in your life.”

Puzzlement crossed Colette’s features; then understanding bloomed. “Riana. Yeah, I should’ve known. What I don’t get is how come Riana knows more of the preternatural world than other mortals.”

Kymaera’s chuckle filled the room. “Oh, you have no idea about how much Riana knows or why. I don’t think anyone knows the extent of knowledge she possesses, including Riana herself. There’s more to Riana than meets the eye. I think she’s one of the most bold, brave, and closed-mouth individuals I know.”

“Riana? Riana Sinclair? Are we talking about the same woman? You know, the blonde with a mouth on her that doesn’t quit?”

“Yup, the one and same. Just because Riana talks a lot doesn’t mean she says everything. I’ve seen her bamboozle people with her chatty self where they’ve told her everything she wanted to know and really, she said nothing.”

Colette considered that for a few moments. “Perhaps you’re right. I’m so used to getting answers and being spoken to, at, from, that I guess I don’t see her interact with others. Makes me wonder what else I don’t know about those I love.”

“Probably as much as you don’t know about yourself, actually.”

“What do you --” Colette paused. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’m doing something I’d never consider doing before my life changed so dramatically.”

Kymaera sat next to Colette, taking her hand and holding it. “We all grow and change, in many ways, we become one with our essence as the nonessentials are burned off. Sometimes it takes something radical to force us out of a rut and truly see ourselves clearly. Vampires, in a way, have that done to them or they’re born that way. We don’t always have the luxury of cloaking ourselves in tons of fanfare or mundane things.” She gave Colette a

reassuring smile. "Sometimes we hate to admit when we've found our true calling, our true love, and are doing the right thing because it would mean admitting our true essence and need. This I give free of charge, Colette. Do yourself a favor and don't give up what really makes you happy just because you think you need to prove or even deny your true self. It makes you no less of a person to do so. Otherwise, you'll end up like me -- bitter, alone, and wishing for what I walked away from."

Kymaera kissed Colette's cheek and rose from the bed. "I'll be around for the next hour or so. I'll lock up everything when I leave and see you in the morning when you get up again."

"Thanks, Kymaera. If you ever have need of me or my services --"

"Will do, Colette. Get some rest." Kymaera shut the door behind her, leaving only the low light coming in from the windows.

Colette thought about the wise vampire's words. Was she running from her true essence? From her true nature and love? The idea tore at her heart. She thought about the possibility of losing Owain forever and her actions scared her more than she thought possible. Grabbing her cell phone, she pulled up Owain's number and debated. *Should I call him? Should I tell him I love him and what I've planned? Would he understand?*

Pressing the talk button, she waited. It rang three times then went to voice mail. Hesitating, Colette spoke haltingly. "O, it's Col. I'm near Chichen Itza. I love you, I miss you. I'm sorry I ran, but I thought I could help and protect you. Things are more confusing and convoluted than we ever thought. Please come to me if you can."

Having done that, Colette slipped out of her jeans and slid under the covers of the bed. Laying her head on the soft down pillows, she let herself relax and trust in the safety of Kymaera and the house.

Chapter Eleven

Owain listened to his voice mail as he landed at Cancun airport. A small smile played on his lips. *She loves me. Hot damn, there is hope after all. I do wonder at the cost she paid for doing so.* Closing his eyes for a brief moment, Owain made a decision to let her know how he felt. After their time together and now this time apart, no matter how brief, it only proved to him that the torc now sitting in his bag had been correct. She was his soul mate. The one whom he'd give the world for and at the same time, needed her to give the world back. Without her, he was lost in more ways than just spiritually.

Dialing a number, he waited until they picked up.

"Kymaera? Owain. I'm at the airport, grabbing my baggage and making my way to the car rental area."

"Turn around. I'm behind you. Colette is safe and sleeping."

Owain turned around and saw the blonde vampire standing there shaking her head. Closing his phone, he slid it down into his jeans pocket. He put out his hand and took Kymaera's. "Good to meet you in person. It's been a damned long time. Where's Pyotr?"

"He and I are no longer together. He's gone his own way." Her tone was flat for a moment. Her dark eyes looked haunted, then cleared. "It's good you're here. Let's get your stuff, and I'll drive you to the safe house where Colette is."

"She knows it's a safe house?"

"Oh, yeah, and agreed to stay once we cleared up the misconceptions of Helsingers in vampire society."

Owain smiled. "You've got to admit, they don't fit well. She's doing okay, though?"

Kymaera shook her head while laughing. "What is it with the two of you? Do you not talk clearly with one another? What happened to the straightforwardness that all Maraighs are known for? She's fine. Had her self-righteousness shattered, but she's fine."

Owain narrowed his gaze. “Let me guess, Dr. Kymaera gave her the lowdown on her actions. Does she have any idea that you’re the one who helped Freud and provided the basis for the field of psychiatry?”

“Nah, but I knew my points hit home. When she woke from her nap, we talked more while she ate. She also let me look at Tony’s notes. We’re beyond fucked, vampire. Why did you start this origin searching for anyway?”

Owain said nothing while he grabbed his bags. When she led him to the parking area, he sighed as the warmth of the springtime air hit him. “Honestly, it’s been my thing for a long time. Having Elathan helped me collect the myths worldwide and then I correlated the data from them. My concern is not about those who choose to become vampires, Kymaera. My concern is about those who are turned against their will.”

“You mean the sharing and such. I agree. There is a problem of forcing conversion. So what were you trying to do?”

“Find a cure.”

“Oh shit, Owain, do you have any clue about the problem that brings?”

Rolling his eyes at the House of Sekhmet, Owain responded. “What do you think?”

“Fuck, Owain. It’s bad enough you and your two brothers were formed outside of the vampire convention, but searching for a cure without notifying those who are heads of the Houses or the High Council is fucking suicide.”

“Is there a cure?”

Kymaera hesitated. “I can’t talk about things of that nature. I really can’t. One, it’s not my place without permission. Two, sometimes things aren’t how you wish.”

“So something was tried, but not successful. Hmm, I’ll have to think about that then,” Owain said, sliding into the passenger seat of the car. “Let’s get to Colette before she wakes up. I need to tell her a few things.”

The car ride was long enough to make both vampires antsy. They talked shop and about some of the changes handed down through the High Council of Vampires. Kymaera also shared with him what she knew personally of Xilan.

“Honestly, Owain, you’re not going to like him.”

“You’ve seen him?”

“All of the heads see him. It’s part of the package deal. You’re head of the House, you see the Lord God Xilan.” The way she pronounced it was with the “ch” sound for the “x”. Owain knew she’d have the name pronounced in its ancient tongue. “Each House has one to donate blood on the spring and fall equinox. The Serpent of Quezacoatl comes when it’s time.”

“You mean Kukulcán pyramid? El Castillo?”

“That’s just a physical manifestation of what happens on the other level. You know what it’s like having walked the Otherworld as a Druid. Same thing here, you know. What happens on one level occasionally manifests in this realm.”

“So we get the sunrise and the snake crawling up the pyramid or down the pyramid depending on the equinox in question.”

“Yup. In reality, the snake comes out the night before and taps the people to come for their annual gifting of blood and bond to Xilan.”

“I want in on this year’s.”

“You do not.”

“With or without your permission, I’m going.” Owain looked determined. “I want answers, Ky. It’s not hard to imagine if I gift my blood to the damn god, I could get some kind of answer and perhaps some peace from this.”

“Who did you turn unintentionally, Owain?”

“What?”

“Who did you turn that shouldn’t have been turned?” Her voice was soft and understanding.

Owain sighed. “Our sister.”

Kymaera’s blonde brow lifted, but she said nothing. Owain released a breath he’d been holding for a long time, perhaps even centuries. He knew that Kymaera wouldn’t judge him, but in many ways he judged himself and found himself guilty.

“Does your sister find you guilty?”

“No. In fact, she says it was something meant to be. Yet, at the same time, I wonder. She should have the choice to be mortal if she wanted. I took it unintentionally. I had just been changed, thanks to Morrigu, and I was trying to control my hunger.”

Kymaera nodded, listening. She said nothing more, but could empathize completely with the new hunger, the hunger that hit differently than a hunger for food. It was something to be battled, she knew. And on some level accepted, as it helped reduce the cravings.

“My sister came over from Ireland to see us. She hadn’t known that we’d been changed to our new preternatural forms. I was the first she saw, as she and I were the closest. Fiona was so thrilled; she grabbed me from behind and hugged me. I reacted with my new instincts, moving her around and biting her. Then once I felt the blood in my mouth, I couldn’t stop before she was almost dead. Then realization kicked in. I had to save her. I had to. I cut my wrist and fed her my blood. When she started coughing and gagging, I instinctively started reaching for her essence, giving it a kick. Somehow the blood exchange and the jumpstart to her soul did the trick. I could feel the changes in her as she began to get her colour back and recover. She hadn’t asked to be made a vampire. She never complained

when I begged forgiveness and told her what had happened. It is, however, my fault because I didn't have enough control to prevent it."

"That's tough, Owain. But know this, there was some kind of genetic marker in her that allowed the change. Usually when our DNA goes into the person, if it's time, it can be tweaked awake. It's like triggers that activate latent diseases. We have to deal that some mortals are changed and some are not." Her hand patted his arm. "It's not easy and you're right, sometimes people aren't meant to be changed, especially against their will. Yet, here is something I don't think you realize, not everyone bitten or forced to drink our blood changes."

"No?"

"It's that DNA sequence thing I was telling you about. Without that genetic tag marker, it won't happen. You can be a fang feast for a vampire, but if you don't have that marker, nothing will ever get you to change into a vampire."

"I ... I hadn't realized." Owain rubbed his cheek, his thoughts racing to revise some of his preconceived notions and the answers that had resulted. Based on this, it didn't change his feelings, but it made him realize the other problems that could occur, especially for the Seekers, the psi-talented humans who helped the vampires, not to mention the Helsingers.

"It's okay, it's not like it's public knowledge. There were reasons for the vampire coalition and that was one of the reasons."

"I need to know more."

Kymaera pointed. "We're at the house. Let's get inside and we'll all talk, okay?"

She turned the car into the driveway, parked it and turned off the engine. Tossing the keys to Owain, she got out of the vehicle. "She's in the first bedroom on the left. I'm going to go hunt around out here for a while. Go make up with your soul mate."

"Thanks, Ky. I owe you."

"I'll remember that if I ever need something."

Rushing into the house, he made his way to the room in question. There she lay, sleeping, just like that day in Dublin. Going to her side, he knelt next to her; his lips feather light against her cheek. "I love you, Col. I'm here."

Colette murmured in her sleep, her body moving toward Owain. A smile creased his face as he whispered in her ear. "Col, wake up. It's me, Owain. I'm here, baby."

Her lashes fluttered as she slowly opened her eyes. "O?"

"Hi there. I'm here with you. Scoot over and let me lie down with you." Slowly he eased her over while she struggled with consciousness.

"You're really here," she whispered as her fingers caressed his face, his cheeks, down his jawline. "I'm so sorry I left like I did."

"It's okay. I'm at fault for making you go out that way."

She curled in his arms and relaxed. "We both didn't think things through and talk enough."

"You've been listening to Kymaera."

"You and she --"

"Never. She and Pyotr were together. She's not quite my taste. Then there's the fact she'd kick my ass if I had tried anything."

Colette laughed. "I'm glad you're here. I've got the notes from Tony's wife. It's going to be interesting to figure out what to do."

"Equinox is soon."

"Day after tomorrow."

"Ky wants to talk to us, but I think we've got a few moments to spare for this." His mouth caressed hers as his hands cupped her breasts, then slowly slid down her body until he cupped her sex. "You're hot down there, Col. How come?"

Colette responded with a moan, her mouth claiming his, her tongue caressing along the inside of his mouth, then biting his lower lip. "Because I was dreaming of you."

"Now I'm here. Perhaps I can take care of that need," he teased. Sliding down her body, he tugged off her lacy panties and spread her legs open.

Her sex glistened under his gaze, her body flushing with desire. "Yes, please," Colette begged as Owain leaned in over her, his tongue slowly licking up toward her clitoris.

Turned on by her miniscule movements, he suckled tightly on the tight nub. "Oh, oh, oh ... oh, my gods, O!"

He paused in his ministrations. "Yes?"

"Don't. Stop. Please. Don't stop!"

"Yes, dear." He bent again, this time, parting her slick folds with his fingers, sliding them up and down the length of the slit while his mouth sucked and teased her clit. Slowly, tauntingly he slid two fingers deep in her pussy, enjoying how her muscles clenched at them, trying to draw him in farther. With deliberate slowness, he eased them out, only to hear her whimper in need. Grinning, he slid his fingers in and out of her, faster and with more vigor. "Like that, Col?"

"Yes," she hissed, her body arching to ease his fingers deeper in her. "More, O. I need you."

"Not yet. I'm not done yet." Sliding a third finger in, he curled his fingers slightly so they rasped against her inner walls. "Enjoy this, Col. This is for you."

Everything became a blur as pleasure overloaded her body. Owain was here in Mexico with her; he loved her, and more importantly, he was pleasing her because he wished it. Feeling an orgasm rushing through her body, Colette let it reflect the love she had for this

vampire, this man, this Druid who gave of himself to her and for others. His name flew from her lips, as her body seemed to shatter under his loving ministrations.

Quickly shedding his clothes, Owain eased himself over her and with one quick thrust was embedded deep in her wet warmth. "Heaven, your body is heaven on earth, *mé grá*."

Together they moved, slow, and then fast, until neither of them could stop the explosion as they united in climax, souls joining and bonding, this time for love, not just sex.

Afterward, they cuddled, talking softly about some of their misunderstandings. "What happens to us after this vampire history venture?"

Owain tapped her chin. "We go back to Egypt. Figure out what we want to do. What our next step will be. I don't know if we'll get a cure for those who are made vampires against their will, but regardless, there's much to be done to keep the preternatural healthy and to keep track of the genetic changes as evolution continues."

"Sounds like you're afraid we won't find an answer."

A knock on the door interrupted his response. "Hey, you two, lunch is ready, if you're hungry. Perhaps we can also go over the sacred texts found."

"Be right out!" they chimed together. Chuckling, they slowly got out of bed, sharing a deep, intimate kiss. Dressing took a bit of time as each tried to cop a feel of the other. Finally, when they were presentable, Owain and Colette made their way to the kitchen area.

Kymaera sat at the table, bowl to her left, papers to her right and toward the middle of the table. She glanced up at them. "Good to see you've both made up. You both looked like shit earlier."

"Your smooth words just touch my heart, Ky. What are you reading?" Owain helped Colette into a chair and fetched them both some stew and drinks.

"I'm comparing the translations to the original renderings of the Mayan glyphs. There are some inconsistencies in translation." Kymaera took a pencil and quickly wrote some marks in the margins. "Was Dr. Medallano qualified to translate the Mayan language?"

Owain looked at Colette. "I don't know. He was great when it came to excavation as well as preservation. Col?"

"He knew the basics, I believe. I know he and Riana often argued over various translated pieces. She accused him of taking too much liberty in meanings."

"She's right. Some of his stuff makes no sense in the context of other things." Kymaera marked another passage on the page, along with a quick sign of another Mayan glyph. "I speak and read Mayan fluently. Some of his meanings are quite provocative, but I think once he started getting an idea of the meanings, his imagination took flight."

Owain got up and stepped around to grab the notes that Kymaera had finished with. "I can't read Mayan, so I'm going to rely on you, Ky."

"Your confidence is shattering, Celtic boy."

“Like you’re any better, Russian Steppes?”

“I spent over two hundred years here during various time periods.” The vampire smiled at them both. “It’s why I’m fluent. The hardest part of that time was concealing my blonde hair.”

“I bet. So how untrue are the white god myths?” Colette asked curiously. She dug into her food while listening.

“Very untrue. Missionary twists in the tales to make it acceptable that they overruled the natives. Some of the worst uses of the myths were by the missionaries who forced conversion and made them out to be some kind of white gods. Most people don’t truly understand the whole story with Moctezuma and Cortez.” Kymaera frowned. “I always hated that I didn’t kill more of them when I had the chance.”

“Ooh, is your prejudice showing, Ky?” Owain teased lightly.

A blonde brow lifted. “Tell me you just didn’t ask that.”

Colette looked at each vampire. “What did I just miss?”

“Honestly, nothing much, Colette. See, I’m from a country that was overrun by invaders all the time.”

“Ah, explains everything. Of course, it’s not like the Celts didn’t get their ass whipped.”

Owain snorted. “That wasn’t until after my time. Well, my regular mortal time.”

“Still it happened.”

“Name one place on earth that hasn’t been invaded by someone,” Kymaera said softly with a hint of humor.

Both Colette and Owain stopped and looked at the vampire. Owain answered first. “You know something, you really suck, Ky. Really.”

“Thanks. Here’s the deal. The snake will come tonight or tomorrow sometime. After sundown tomorrow, we need to go to Chichen. Once there, you must follow me and my commands or it’ll be a bloodbath.”

Colette raised a hand. “Um, what the fuck are you talking about?”

Kymaera retold the same things to Colette that she had told to Owain. With the texts she was retranslating, she showed them the cause and effects of the blood offering and what happened when there was a lack given by the houses. “See this section dealing with those who are offered that are human? That’s not accurate. This symbol here is for someone who is more than human.”

“You mean a demigod?”

“No,” Kymaera reiterated. “Consider the idea of a new breed of human that possessed unusual abilities not seen in the general public. You know the concept of metahumans? That symbol means that the humans sacrificed were not just mortal, but had the potential of being more.”

“So, this fits into the grouping that was being done in order to control vampirism,” Colette realized with a start. “Were there no true humans given in blood that night?”

“It looks like none. But that would hold consistent with what the Coalition wanted. See this glyph? This is the symbol for Xilan. With it is *ch’am*, which means ‘let blood.’ It means that the blood was given or let. There wasn’t any death associated with the ritual.”

“Which means that they didn’t kill those in the first ritual, unlike what was implied.” Owain grinned, his fangs showing. “Oh, this is good. Aren’t some of the Houses feuding?”

“Yes, but not within a five mile radius of sacred land.”

Owain nodded. “The usual standard as in many ancient cultures.”

“You have to admit, we’re definitely diverse in beliefs, Owain.”

He nodded in agreement while he continued thinking on how to best approach the gods. “Truly the vampires are. But I think we need to speak with Xilan himself.”

“Cut to the chase, why don’t you?” Colette teased. “Thing is, he’s right. When we give our blood, how is it taken and where is he?”

Kymaera stopped her writing and looked at Colette. “What did you say? Did I hear you correctly that you’re offering your blood to the vampire god himself?”

Colette nodded as she clasped his hand. “How is our blood taken as an offering and where is Xilan?”

“You’ve asked the right questions, Colette,” Kymaera answered, placing the pen on the table. “And in volunteering blood offering without coercion, you’ve discovered your pass to meet with Xilan, himself.”

Chapter Twelve

Colette looked up at the night sky, trying to find her center in the maelstrom of emotion going through her. They were getting ready to head out to Chichen. They had spent most of yesterday making their plans and redoing them as each thought of a possible problem arising. *Goddess, if you hear me, protect your priestess as she goes into the jaws of gods know what, to face something worse than death.*

“You ready to go, Col?” Owain leaned over and kissed her squarely on the mouth.

“Yeah, how about you?”

“As well as can be expected. Ky, we’re ready.”

“Let’s ride. If we’re first, it’s good. If we’re last, it’s okay, but in the middle is just not going to cut it for what you both need to do.” Kymaera strapped on her last dagger and climbed in the car.

Owain climbed in back and dragged Colette with him. Sitting together, they enjoyed the silence of the ride while accepting strength from each other. Owain’s hand caressed hers, keeping her body flush against his. He knew that Kymaera was amused at his behavior but he didn’t give a fuck. This time together was important and special, because if things went wrong, they would be the first to die during the giving.

“We’re here. If you’re wondering about how we’re able to get past the guards, it’s because on the night before the four days, our guards take those shifts.”

The three of them walked toward the entrance of Chichen, each lost in their thoughts. As they walked near the gravesite, Kymaera nodded at a few native Mayan vampires. They spoke rapidly to her and her responses were just as rapid. No one came close to them; in fact, many stepped away, letting them approach the pyramid without a problem.

“Any reason why we’re given the leper treatment?” Colette whispered.

“Kymaera.”

“Ah.”

“She’s got a rep. It’s one of those things. It’s always like this. She’s a kick-ass vampire bitch.”

“I heard that and thanks,” Kymaera whispered back with a laugh.

“Anytime. I mean it.” Owain squeezed Colette’s hand as they stood before the pyramid.

“Where do we go?” Colette asked.

“Up. To the top. We can make our gifts to Xilan. Do you see him?” Kymaera gestured to the small platform area in front. There was someone there who wore what seemed to be a feather headdress.

The climb of the ninety-one steps was interesting. The steepness left them almost climbing with their hands. Only Kymaera took the steps in stride, never once bending over to balance herself.

“She makes me feel like a frumpy housewife,” Colette grumbled halfheartedly.

“She makes most people feel frumpy. Thing is, they don’t get how insecure she truly is,” Owain whispered back.

“She can also cut out your heart and feed it to the other,” Kymaera said in a low singsong voice.

“Spoilsport.”

“Thanks.”

Once they were at the top, Kymaera led the way. In front of a man who stood in traditional Mayan clothes, she spoke, as if the other robed people were of less importance than this one man.

“Lord God Xilan, I bring to you the House Sekhmet gift for this season. May *ch’am* be yours and yours alone.” Stepping back, she urged Owain and Colette forward.

“Lord Xilan,” Owain said with a slight bow, offering both wrist and neck to the vampire god.

Colette was amazed at how gorgeous the vampire god truly was. From his satiny black hair to the dark-chocolate eyes, he reeked of alpha male genes. His hard, virile body was barely covered, and the colorful feathers only emphasized his standing as a god among men. His skin was the color of milk chocolate mixed with cream. Her mouth went dry and she tried not to think of the ultimate vampire in a sexual way. Yet, try as she might, a portion of her brain imagined what it would be like having both Owain and Xilan pleasuring her.

Xilan took the proffered wrist and held it to his mouth. Fangs emerged and sank into Owain’s skin. Colette watched as the god drank a few mouthfuls and a shiver overcame her. At that moment, she realized the true reason for the *ch’am*. He was the one who made sure the precautions were kept. He was the reason why humans were never tainted. Kymaera had pointed out the other night that every vampire was to give blood to Xilan with no

exceptions. The metahumans were harder to bring, but if they worked within the vampire community, they participated. He was the living law invoked by the blood gods of the various pantheons.

You're right, more than human. Why are you here?

Colette looked around, then noticed the god looking at her directly. "Are you speaking to me, Lord Xilan?"

Come forward. Let me drink and I shall speak with you and your vampire soul mate. Perhaps I shall even grant your deepest desires, Colette Wylde.

Approaching him, she bowed her head and offered her wrist as she'd seen Owain do. There was a brushing of her hair and when Xilan went to bite her carotid, Owain placed his hand over her neck.

"No! She is my soul mate. You will not disrespect me in this way, god or no."

The dark eyes flashed at the Druid. "Who are you to stop me?"

"I am not one of yours, Xilan. I am the one made by Morrigu alone. She is my bride to be, my soul mate, the releaser of my curse. I will have no one else marking her neck but myself. Do as you will to me, but I cannot allow you to take something that can never belong to you."

Xilan's hand slapped Owain down to the ground. "Do you know not what I can do to you?"

Owain chuckled. "You can't kill me, Xilan. Did you hear what I said? Only Morrigu can cause my death, not you."

Xilan spoke rapidly in Mayan at Kymaera who nodded. Her knife was unsheathed and placed at the throat of one of Xilan's priests. Turning to face Owain, who struggled to stand, Xilan growled. "What is it you want, Owain Maraigh, vampire?"

"I want a cure for those wrongly changed to vampires."

"No."

"You would make people who had no choice suffer the change?"

"All who change will it to be so."

"Untrue. My sister did not."

"Your sister?"

"Fiona Maraigh. House Morrigu."

"She has blooded here. Never have I sensed regret for what she is." Xilan spoke aside to his priest. "We shall ask her ourselves."

Within a few moments, a tall, graceful presence climbed the stairs. As the person approached, Colette noted the long red hair and pale skin. Concentrating, Colette focused upon Xilan and asked about the woman. *Is this Fiona?*

Yes. She's been one of my servants for the past century. Part of her training for what is to come for her.

She tried not to react as she continued speaking to the deity. *Lord Xilan, what Owain said is true. Many have been changed against their will. In fact, some go to the extreme of killing mortals in order to get themselves destroyed. I am a Helsinger. I have killed them in anger and for their deeds. I will not lie to you.*

I know, Little Bird. Just listen to her words.

"You've asked for me, Lord Xilan?" The accent was pure Irish, the beauty the same. Fiona was a woman who'd make any man proud.

"This man claims kinship to you."

Fiona looked and saw Owain. Without a word, she went into his open arms, hugging and kissing him. "Oh, *deárthair*, you've come to give to Xilan. How are you?"

"I'm okay, but I'm here to rectify a wrong I did many years past."

Fiona looked from the Mayan god to her brother. "Me?"

"Yes."

"Because you made me a vampire? Owain, listen to me. It might not have been my choice to be one at first, but eventually, I'd have wanted to become one or would've sought out to be made one." Her pale hand rested on her brother's forearm. Xilan tightened his grip on Colette's arm, causing her to flinch.

"But you should've had the choice as to when. There are others who had no choice either. I wish for a serum to correct that problem. Kymaera said there was an attempt a long time ago, but it was faulty medicine."

Fiona looked at Colette and smiled. "This is your *anamchara*?"

"*Tá sí.*"

"Good choice. She's perfect for you." Fiona turned to Xilan and knelt on one knee, offering her wrist. "Lord Xilan, know this, what my brother speaks is true. However, I don't wish to be made human again. I enjoy my vampire state, as I know he does."

"Then there is no problem. Go, Owain. You are free to leave. I shall drink of Colette, on her wrist, and you both are free to go."

Xilan put his mouth on Colette's wrist. She felt the bite and felt the blood flow out of her. As he continued suckling her blood, Colette realized that this drinking was different from the one done to Owain. *Xilan, please, you must stop! You're taking too much of my blood!*

No, I will not stop yet, Little Flower. There is recompense to be paid for annoying me.

"Owain! He's going to drain me for your actions!" Colette sank to one knee and her free hand slipped to her boot.

Owain stepped forward, but Fiona blocked his path. “No, *deárthaír*. You must pay for your behaviour. This is the way of our kind.”

“Then take my blood, not my *anamchara*! Fiona, she’ll die. She’s only mortal!”

Fiona looked at Colette, who was getting paler. “Is she truly only mortal?”

“He said ... he said ... I was more than human in my mind. I can hear him speak to me,” she whimpered as she tried pulling away from the mouth stuck on her wrist.

Owain tilted his head back and chanted in Gaelic. “Morrighu, daughter of war, spiller of blood, come to the help of your daughter, to your son. I need you. She needs you. Xilan breaks the covenant made by the vampire coalition!”

With the uttering of his words, there was a stiff breeze and the sound of a bird in the air. Owain knew that birdcall. It was one he was well acquainted with. The bird landed on the platform and shifted into the form of Morrighu, Celtic Goddess of War and Death. Looking at Owain, then Xilan, she stepped forward and forced Xilan to remove his mouth from Colette.

“That. Is. Enough,” she stated while shoving the Mayan god away from her priestess. “She is mine and you will not touch her again. How dare you try to enact a change on her? You may be the living embodiment of the rules, but you cannot instigate the change in one marked!”

Owain knelt on the other side of Colette. “Please, Morrighu, I don’t care if you never let me have her in my life again. Just save her. I think he drained her too completely.”

Morrighu smiled at the Druid. “She is your *anamchara*. Where is the torc, Owain?”

Fumbling at the pouch he had put at the back of his belt, he opened it and pulled out the Torc of Morrighu. Carefully he handed it to her. The goddess placed it around Colette’s neck. The coolness of the metal seemed to stimulate Colette to consciousness.

“Morrighu? Is it time to go?” Colette tried to stand up.

“No. Rest, my child. You have been almost drained of your blood. Your soul mate is willing to have you healed and, if necessary, let me take you away from here and him forever.”

“Here, yes. Him, never. I love him. He’s my soul mate. He’s the one I want to be with from now until we both die. Even in the wheel of rebirth, we can be together.” Colette raised a hand toward the goddess. “Please, don’t take me from him. Whether he’s a vampire or he’s human, he’s mine.”

“Is she yours, Owain?”

“*I gcónaí.*”

Morrighu nodded. “Xilan, I shall require your help to rectify your mistake. Owain, you shouldn’t have challenged like that. Gods need to be convinced and coerced. Had you asked nicely, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Morrigu, had you tried to bite her neck, I’d have acted the same way to you.”

“I know. Now. It will take us to bring her back, but first, she must make a choice.”

“A choice?”

Morrigu grinned. “Colette, you’ve been bitten by the primal vampire. The god created to keep the vampires from overrunning the world. The one who watches over this branch of the preternatural creatures of the night. Are you human or are you vampire?”

Colette grinned softly. “Does this mean I could bite Owain and make him come when I bite him correctly?”

The goddess’s laughter joined Xilan’s. “Yes, it does.”

“Then I am vampire.”

Morrigu nodded. “Xilan, take her hands. Owain, cut your wrist and feed Colette your blood. Colette, my daughter, drink his blood.”

Owain did as he was bid and knelt, offering his bleeding wrist to Colette. “Sip, *mé ghrá*.”

Colette slowly licked the blood from him, carefully ignoring the metallic taste that filled her mouth. Morrigu touched her lips as she drank. “Two halves made whole, blood binding and soul. Let them feed from each other, needing no other. Let the curse be fulfilled, let the life be loved and built.”

A flow of energy passed into Colette and then into Owain. Their gazes met and held. Owain stroked her cheek. “I love you, Colette. Be mine.”

“I’m yours as much as you’re mine. Kiss me.”

He leaned in, kissing her lips. Suddenly he pulled back with an “Ow!” He wiped away a droplet of blood. “You bit me!”

Colette grinned, her fangs showing. “Damn straight, I did. Guess I am a vampire at heart!”

“You’re my vampire. None else has the blood to make you complete.”

“Can we see who can bite the other into submission?”

“Later.” Owain turned to both Xilan and Morrigu. “Thank you for your help. Am I free now, Morrigu?”

“Yes, the curse is finished within you. You shall always be a vampire, but you shall have a mortal lifespan, as will your wife-to-be. Though, among the Celts, she is your wife by claiming alone. Be happy, Owain. Fight wrong.”

Xilan nodded. “This is a beautiful conversion like none I’ve seen before.”

“My daughter, my right to convert, though in the end it was her choice. Choice matters.”

Silence filled the air. “You’re right. Owain, there is an elixir to cure vampirism. However, there are problems with it.”

“Yes?”

“It is only fifty-percent effective.”

“That’s not good.”

“Will you and your wife try to synthesize a better version of the elixir?” Xilan pulled out a small vial filled with an opalescent fluid. “This is the cure you seek, but in many ways, it’s death on earth. Those who don’t convert go mad or lose their natural skills if they do convert.”

Owain looked at Colette. She nodded. She knew what Owain wanted to do. “Thank you, Lord Xilan. My wife and I would take the elixir and work on a better version of it.”

“Limited quantities to be available, Owain. That means that it’s not made easily accessible. People who want to convert back must prove they’re worthy.”

“Makes sense. Reduce the loss and the side effects.”

Colette stood up, brushing off the dirt. “The elixir should only be offered through the Council.”

Morrigu smiled. “That’s my daughter, a born warrior and ruler.”

Colette chuckled. “Well, not quite. More like I don’t want to be responsible for giving it to someone who will suffer when I don’t really know them or their actions.”

Owain put the vial in his pouch, then took Colette’s hand. Squeezing it tightly, he bowed his head to both gods. “Thank you. We shall take care of this.”

Kymaera tossed the car keys to Owain. “Here.”

“You read my mind.”

“Nah, you’ve given blood to someone who’s been converted, you’re in love, and you are married. Congratulations. I’ll get a ride back to my place from someone else.”

Morrigu leaned over and whispered something to Colette. She whispered back and growled. Morrigu sighed. “Agreed, daughter. But I still don’t like it.”

Colette touched the torc, which glowed at her touch. “Doesn’t matter. You owe me personally. Just do it.”

“As you’ve asked.” Morrigu shifted into a raven and took to the air. When she was out of sight, Owain looked at Colette.

“She’s gone to heal Riana.”

“Ah.”

“Let’s go home.”

“Yes.” Owain and Colette bowed to Xilan and made their way down the pyramid, then escaped Chichen Itza without delay.

At the car, they kissed. “*Conas tá tú?*”

“I’m well, I promise. Let’s go make love at the house.”

“Why not catch a flight and head home?” Owain said with a grin.

“Sure. But I want to bite you.”

“Not my cock.”

“Yes.” Colette winked at him. “It’d be interesting if I can get you worked up and with a small nip make you come.”

“Evil wench!”

“Go me!”

They laughed and kissed once more before climbing in the car.

Epilogue

They sat in first class, relaxing. "You know we need to shower together next time."

"Why?"

"Water conservation. Everyone should shower together with someone they love. It saves water."

"Funny, O. Very funny."

Owain kissed her palm. "But I'm serious."

A man across from them chuckled. "You tell her, sir. It's important for a man to conserve water. Otherwise, we're told we're wasteful."

"You make your wife real happy, don't you?" Colette countered with a laugh. "My name is Colette. This is my new husband, Owain. You are?"

"Mark DeNuzzio. You all headed to Turkey, or further east?"

"Egypt. You?" Owain asked.

"Going back to work. I'm part of the one hundred sixty-second infantry. We're assigned to Iraq," Mark commented. He pointed to the other guys next and near him. "That's Zach, Scot, and Rich. We just finished some well-earned R and R. Saw some of our friends from www.booksforsoldiers.com and now we're going back to finish our tour of duty."

Colette undid her seatbelt and got up. She hugged each guy and whispered. "Thank you. Thank you for serving the side of peace, even though sometimes it means war. Thank you for being strong and doing something that most people would flinch over. Be safe over there."

Owain shook each soldier's hand. "Thanks for being the way of peace for a torn country. I don't know how many have said it, but we truly appreciate you all and all you do."

Zach smiled, showing off why women always fell for him, Colette thought silently. “Thanks, but it’s what we chose to do. We only hope to come home in one piece. You both look a bit worn. Everything all right?”

Colette shot Owain a look and elbowed him. “Don’t let him tell you the one about him being beaten by a woman with a sharp mouth and teeth. The only thing that’s true is that I tried to kill him.”

“Kill him?” Mark asked. Colette decided he was the comfort rock of the group.

“It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got time.”

Owain leaned over and whispered in Colette’s ear. “Yes, we have all the time in the world now. Let’s entertain the troops with a slightly reworked version of what happened.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you forever, my Col.”

Colette faced the guys and grinned. “What was I saying? Oh, yeah, the reason we look so beat up and such. You sure you want to hear this?”

The guys all nodded and cheered her on. Laughing, Colette settled down in her seat, her hand holding Owain’s.

“It all started in Cairo when I was trying to find the guy who killed my sister and nephew ...”

 THE END 

Cynnara Tregarth

Born in Chicago, currently living in the Peninsula state, aka Florida, Cynnara loves to write, has always been writing or telling stories. Unfortunately for her, it means that her sense of direction sucks on occasion, but she can tell you all about ancient history. She always writes hot, but on occasion, delves into various other genres. Yet her first love is paranormal with various other genres tossed in for good measure.

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