

EAST SIDE STORY

Cat Marsters

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Sundown Investigations 1: East Side Story

By

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Faeries and vampires hate each other. Everyone knows that. So why does Ruarc of the Unseelie have a vampire in his bed?

Maria knows she's supposed to hate faeries, but she has no idea why. So far, Ruarc's saved her life, fed her the most potent blood she's ever tasted, and given her the best orgasm of her life.

But something's after Ruarc, something dark and nasty, and it certainly isn't going to let one fledgeling vampire stop it.

Chapter One

For the second time in as many weeks, the water glass on Ruarc's desk shattered.

“Chloe,” he yelled.

A whimper was his reply. Ruarc stood up, sighing, and left his office for Chloe’s. When he opened the door, it was to see her sprawled across the desk, totally naked, luscious thighs spread for the man driving his thick cock into her.

“You know,” Ruarc said, leaning in the doorway, “a less tolerant boss might complain about you two having sex on company time.”

“That’s... because...” Chloe panted in reply, “he wouldn’t... be invited... to join in.”

“This is true,” Ruarc said. “However he also wouldn’t, and this is crucial, be unable to keep a water glass on his desk for fear of it breaking whenever his colleagues felt like doing the naughty.”

“Sorry,” Chloe gasped.

Ruarc rolled his eyes. He’d already had the windows in the whole office replaced with some techno substance that wouldn’t shatter so easily. He’d told the workmen it was because they were going to be recording loud music there. Not because they had a siren on staff.

“Do you want to?” Alexius said, in between thrusts.

“Want to...?”

“Join in?”

His cock stirred. “I have work to do.”

Chloe sat up, rubbing her pert breasts against Alexius’s chest and pouting at Ruarc. “For fifteen minutes? You look so tense.” She beckoned him closer. “It’s good for what ails you.”

Ruarc glanced out at the main office. They still didn’t have a secretary, so if anyone came by there’d be no one to greet them... which was pretty unprofessional. But...

“We’ll both lick you,” Chloe said, and Ruarc was unfastening his fly before he’d even thought about it.

Chloe wriggled to her feet, Alexius’s cock popping out of her, and went to her knees by the leather chair facing the desk as Ruarc took a seat there.

“You don’t mind?” Ruarc said, glancing at Alexius as Chloe rubbed her breasts over his thigh.

“I’m Greek,” he said, as if that explained it. Which

Ruarc supposed it might: Alexius's father was an Olympian god, and in his day it had actually been fashionable to take a male lover.

Chloe's tongue danced over Ruarc's cock, which leapt to attention. He closed his eyes and eased his legs further apart as Alexius knelt down and joined in the fun. Theoretically, Chloe and Alexius were a committed couple, but they were also highly sexual beings who often relished a third party.

Since Ruarc had been instrumental in the forming of their relationship, he was often invited to be that third party. He rarely refused. Hell, it wasn't as if he had the time to go out finding his own thrills.

Alexius's tongue found Ruarc's balls, and he sighed. Although, maybe he ought to try. They were both excellent lovers, but...

...he so often felt like a third wheel.

Right then Chloe took him fully in her mouth, which she could open unfeasibly wide, and he let out a gasp. Having one mouth on him was stimulating enough, but two was incredible. While Chloe sucked him deep, Alexius ran his tongue in circles around Ruarc's balls, making him see stars. His hands clutched the arms of the chair. His toes curled. "Sweet merciful --"

Ruarc of the Unseelie! To me, now!

His eyes flew open at the voice inside his head. The coldest, most commanding voice he'd ever heard.

The Queen's voice.

Chloe's fingers massaged the base of his cock and it took him a second to formulate his reply.

On my way, my lady.

Chloe looked up at him, her lips still framing his penis. She'd heard the mind-spoken words. A frown creased her perfect brow. *Who are you --?*

"I have to go." Ruarc pushed her away from him, nudged Alexius with his knee. They both looked up at him with frowns and wet lips. Hell, he wanted to stay here and get his cock sucked! "The Queen wants me."

"*We want you,*" Chloe teased.

Ruarc groaned. "Don't. I really have to go." Not for the first time, he wished he had a telekinetic talent. He knew plenty of fae who could dress -- or undress -- themselves with a thought. He had to shove himself back into his clothes, willing his hard-on to go down. It

didn't take much effort. The thought of visiting the Court always put a damper on things.

He straightened his tie, wondering belatedly why he bothered. It wasn't as if the Queen would care, or even notice.

"Have fun," Chloe said, already back in Alexius's arms.

"Doubtful."

"Good luck," Alexius offered, more sensibly.

"Thanks." Ruarc closed his eyes, cleared his mind of the curses against Queen and Court which had been flowing through his head, and concentrated.

Every faery had different skills. Some could teleport. Some were telekinetic. Most could fly. Some, especially Wildfae or those of lesser rank in the courts, had no particular gifts. But every single one could take themselves from the mortal realm to Faery.

When Ruarc opened his eyes, he was standing in a marble hall, vaulted columns arching so high overhead they were partly obscured by clouds. He couldn't see the walls. The Queen changed the proportions of the hall all the time anyway. The air was dark, cold. The

marble gleamed like the blue-tinged skin of a corpse.

Ruarc had always hated the Unseelie Court. Now was no exception.

Mist curled around his ankles. His breath fogged the air until he remembered to stop breathing like a human, and act like a faery.

He strode forward, and as he did his clothing changed from a modern suit and tie to a pair of soft leather breeches, cloud-colored, low-riding. Dark boots, reaching to mid-thigh, replaced his Italian brogues. Straps criss-crossed his chest, securing the gossamer cloak streaming behind him. His hair, trimmed last week to a rough collar-length, lengthened and flowed down his back.

The Queen didn't approve of modern clothing. She did, however, like her men half-naked. If she didn't like what she saw, she simply changed it.

Her throne loomed out of the chilling mist. Thronging it was a crowd of tall, gleaming men and women, dark-skinned and light, but all of a cool hue. Glacial blonde, blue-tinged black. Their clothing was similar to Ruarc's. Their eyes were cold.

Ruarc tried to forget the terror he'd felt the first time

he came to the Court as a child. The disdain of the High Court fae for his low-born parents. The way he'd been thrust forward like a dog doing tricks. The stares of the Court as they realized what he was, what he could do.

They'd stared at him like a creature in a zoo.

Well, he was through with zoos.

The Queen lounged on a throne carved of ice. Her pale skin glowed almost blue in the dim light. Her eyes were the color of ice. She was naked, her thighs spread, one arm curled around the shoulders of a muscular fae licking her breasts.

Ruarc schooled his expression to bland obedience. He didn't let her see his resentment at being pulled from his own sex games to watch hers.

"My lady," he swept his cloak into a bow, "I am your servant."

Her cold eyes met his, chased away the last of the human warmth in his skin. "You are late."

"Apologies, my lady." He didn't offer an excuse. He couldn't lie to her anyway.

The Unseelie Queen regarded him for a long moment.

Her eyes took in every iron scar on his chest, his arms, his cheek. He felt the apprehension of the Court as once again they recognized what he was. The Queen's telepath. The mind-speaker. The fae caught and trapped for five years, ignored by the Queen until those iron scars had nearly killed him.

Ruarc stood still, waiting, not reacting -- but something tugged at his attention. Some warmth. Fear. Unmasked emotion.

He didn't turn his head, but he felt the two humans to his right, concealed by the crowd of silent fae.

You will do something for me, the Queen said inside his head.

Yes, my lady.

Her expression never changed. Neither did his. The fae between her thighs continued licking her breasts. The watching fae remained silent.

You will read these humans.

The fae parted, and Ruarc allowed himself to turn. Two humans, a young man and woman, stood clutching each other and shivering. Their eyes were wide, darting around, terrified.

My lady, I cannot read their thoughts. Not unless they mind-speak them to me.

Then make them mind-speak.

I cannot.

It wasn't a direct lie. Faeries couldn't lie. But it was the truth as Ruarc saw it. To go into the minds of these humans and force their secrets out would be something similar to rape. Ruarc had never tried to do it. He didn't want to know if it was possible. But he had promised to himself that he would never attempt it.

A faery couldn't break his word.

You can read the... how do you put it? The shape of their thoughts.

Yes. That wasn't intrusive. Like shaking a birthday present to see what was inside, but not actually opening it. *That is possible* , he allowed.

Then do it.

He didn't even need to try. *They are very frightened* , he told her.

The Queen's expression still did not change, but with a slight pressure of her hand, she pushed the male faery down until he was licking between her thighs. Her nipples stood up, tight and hard, the freezing air crystallizing the moisture there.

Ruarc didn't react.

I know that they are frightened. Their emotions do not lie. Her eyes flickered in disgust over the human couple, who huddled closer to each other. *But their words do .*

Of course. Humanity's sole advantage over the fae. Lies came easily to them.

What does my lady wish to know? Ruarc asked, depressed.

They have something that belongs to me. It is hidden. Find out where it is.

They stole something from you? Ruarc was surprised. The Queen so rarely went into the mortal realm, and these two didn't have anything about them to suggest they were capable of making their own way to Faery.

They have failed to deliver something which was promised.

Ruarc hesitated, forming his reply carefully. *My lady, I must know what it is before I try to find its location .*

The Queen arched her back as her lover slipped his fingers inside her slick pussy.

Their child, she said. They promised me their first-born child .

Chapter Two

The building was all but closed down when Maria stepped out of the elevator onto the floor housing Sundown Investigations. The wide corridor ended in huge windows overlooking Central Park, the trees like hulking beasts in the darkness.

For a long second she stared, wondering what it looked like in the daylight. Then she shook herself, scowled at her own foolishness, and approached the clear glass

door etched with the company name.

Inside, there was an empty reception area. No one sat behind the large desk, or on the luxurious leather sofas. A couple of exotic plants stood unadmired. A sculpture rose from a nest of foam chippings.

“Hello?” Maria called. The door had been open; their office hours ran late. “Is there anyone here?”

A giggle answered her, and then the deep rumble of a man’s voice. Maria squared her shoulders and waited.

Hell, this place looked expensive. A huge widescreen computer monitor stood on the unmanned desk. The chair facing it was one of those top-of-the-line executive models. Well, what did she expect on the Upper East Side? Cracked windows and cigarette butts on the carpet?

I can’t afford this. Maria found herself backing toward the exit when one of the office doors opened and a slender woman in an expensively cut suit tripped out, laughing.

Her hair was a glossy blonde curtain. Her shoes were designer and vertiginously high. Her nails gleamed with an expensive manicure. Maria curled her own bitten nails into her palms and buffed the scuffed toe of her

shoe on the back of her jeans. She was way outclassed here. What the hell had she been thinking, even coming to this part of town?

Then the blonde swung her elegant head around, and Maria felt as if she'd been sucker-punched. "*Chloe?*"

Chloe's exquisitely made-up eyes lit up. "Oh my gods, Maria! Alexius, come see! It's Maria!"

Maria stood frozen. Chloe rushed over and threw her arms around her. "It's so good to see you! How are you? What are you doing in New York? I didn't even know you were here!"

Over Chloe's expensively-clad shoulder, Maria saw a golden blond man lean in the office doorway. He was dressed as expensively as Chloe and gleamed with the same good health.

Maria sniffed. The two of them smelled like sex. Which figured, since the last time she'd seen them both, that's what they'd been doing.

"Hi," she said, cautiously.

Alexius smiled warmly. "Hi, Maria. How've you been?"

Poor, frightened, and hungry, Maria thought. And angry. Burningly angry.

“Fine,” she said. “I haven’t been in New York all that long. I, er...”

Her accent sounded stronger, too strong. It always did when she was stressed. Seventy years with fangs and inhuman strength, and she still sounded like she’d just crossed the border.

“I...” she began again.

Chloe stepped back and Alexius slung his arm around her. They looked like a magazine cover, expensive and beautiful.

“I...”

I could never afford this.

“I...just came by...” she said slowly, “to say hola.” She gave a wave.

They looked unconvinced.

“I haven’t been in the city long,” she repeated. “I don’t know any other... uh...”

“Paranormals?” Chloe smiled. “There are more than you think. The Seelie prince lives here with his family, during the summer at least. He’s gone south now that the weather’s colder.”

“Fae?” said Maria.

“Yes. Oh, I forgot. You’re a vampire.”

Maria raised her eyebrows.

“I know you and fae don’t get on well. Why is that?”

Maria had no idea. She only knew that the fae she’d met hadn’t been particularly kind to her. “We just don’t,” she said shortly.

“Good job you weren’t here earlier,” Alexius said. “The guy who runs this place is fae.”

“Ruarc,” Chloe put in. “Remember him? From the zoo?”

Disgust churned inside Maria. “Yes,” she said, her lip curling and her fangs extending, “I do.”

Ruarc ran his hands over his face as if he could wash it.

Damn, he hated dealing with the Court. The Queen and her games, her bargains, her convoluted promises.

Their first-born child. Since the couple hadn't planned on having children, they hadn't baulked at the bargain. But the Queen, of course, did not like to be cheated. The baby had been born a week ago. Five years to the day after the human woman had begged for her husband's life after the car accident which had nearly killed him.

His life, for the child's. Ruarc had finally extracted the story from them, not through mind manipulation but by talking. And then he'd sat and thought long and hard about a way to get them out of it. Blocking everyone but the human couple from his thoughts, he'd finally said to them, *Did she ever say how long she wanted the child for?*

She hadn't. And since the couple had one card left to play -- that of the baby's location -- Ruarc had advised them to strike one further bargain. They would give her the location of the baby, if she promised to return it after one human week and never interfere in any of their lives again.

The Queen hadn't been happy with that. Not happy at all. But since it was the only way to get her hands on the kid, she'd eventually complied.

Ruarc accompanied the Queen's messenger back to the mortal realm with the humans, to a suburban house in Canada, and watched the couple hand over the child.

One week, he told them. She could have taken him forever .

The woman sobbed broken-heartedly.

He won't be harmed, Ruarc assured her. This he knew to be true. The fae loved children, doted upon them. Even, as was evidenced tonight, occasionally stole them.

As he left, he told them, If you need anything, mind-speak it to me. And don't ever bargain with the fae again .

That was the trouble with humans, he thought as he flew back over Canada and New England to the city where he lived. They thought they were smarter than anyone else.

Maybe they were, but they weren't as cunning as the fae. No one was.

It was a long flight. By the time the outer edges of New York City came into view, Ruarc was exhausted.

Probably he should have slipped back into Faery and exited back into the mortal realm at a nearer place; but right now he had no wish to see the Queen again.

Sweeping over Brooklyn, something caught at his attention. Something discordant. Something... unnatural.

He flew closer, landed on a roof. Music drifted up to him, something slow and bluesy. It was soothing, a smoky female voice singing a seductive song, but Ruarc wasn't paying full attention. There was something down there, something wrong, something dangerous.

He caught the scent of summer meadows and a brush of warmth, and frowned. That felt like Seelie. Summer fae. But in New York, in winter? What the hell were they doing here?

Shrugging his wings away, checking his appearance was wholly human again -- once more dressed in his suit and tie -- Ruarc made his way down the fire escape to the ground. Flying down was all very well, but knowing his luck some human would spot him and he just wasn't in the mood for that.

He found himself outside a nightclub, and old-fashioned place with a blinking neon sign. Steps led down to a dimly lit bar, patrons at small round tables,

waitresses in short skirts weaving languorously between them. On a stage at the far end, a woman in a glittery dress was husking out old blues tunes to the accompaniment of a small band in tuxedos.

It was like stepping back in time. And it was so not the sort of place to find a Seelie fae. Seelie were everything warm and bright, sunlight and summer and heat; the winter and the night time were the Unseelie realm. To find one here was inexplicable.

Ruarc found him almost immediately, a tanned blond man attracting the attention of every woman in the place. But he wasn't looking at any of them: his eyes were on the singer.

Ruarc watched him a while, but he didn't seem to be doing anything. His energy was very dim, so far removed from the summer sunshine. The guy was probably trying to gather enough strength to make the leap back to Faery. He didn't seem very dangerous at all.

Ruarc turned to leave, just as the singer finished her song and murmured to the audience in a strong Latina accent, "Thank you very much. We will be here tomorrow."

He froze. He knew that voice.

He'd last heard it screaming obscenities and death threats. He'd heard it whimper with pleasure. And, once or twice, he thought he'd heard it sobbing softly.

Ruarc turned, and caught the eye of the woman leaving the stage. Her skin was like milk chocolate, her hair ebony and her eyes a flashing darkness. He knew the moment she recognized him, saw the apprehension and then disgust cross her face.

Of course. Vampires always hated faeries. No one really knew why. They just did.

She held his gaze for a moment, letting scorn darken her beautiful features. Then with an arrogant tilt of her head, she took a bow and swept off the stage.

Vampires. Well, that would account for the dangerous vibe. The Seelie was what felt out of place, and the vampire, a separate entity, was what felt dangerous. Mystery solved. Time to go home, get a strong drink, and go to sleep.

But the instant he stepped outside, something slimy punched him in the face.

* * *

Maria changed her shoes but not her dress, slipping a long raincoat over the sequins and gathering up her bag as she prepared to leave. She'd be glad to get out: the presence of that faery had unsettled her. And not just any faery: by the scar on his cheek she couldn't mistake him.

Last time she'd seen him that scar had been fresh, a blistered gash where iron had struck him as Starne's harem fell down around them. An easy marker to remember him by when all she wanted to do was forget.

“Here.” The bar's owner, a short ugly human who stank of body odor, stood in the doorway holding a sheaf of banknotes. Maria took them, trying not to snatch in her greediness.

She counted.

She scowled.

“This is only half what you promised me.”

He shrugged. “Times are hard, sweetcheeks.”

“*Donot* call me that.”

He gave a leer. “I can call you what I want, babycakes. Until you get your green card, you ain't gonna go

running to no one.”

Maria growled low in her throat. She could easily rip out his jugular, leave him bleeding on the floor -- yeah, and get herself a decent meal into the bargain -- but then where would she be? No more singing money, that was for sure. And no one else would employ her with her total lack of identification, let alone that damned green card.

For a second she wavered, considering the shadowy existence most other vampires seemed to live. But they were vampires with clans, families, protectors. Vampires with money.

The bottom line was, if she killed this man, she'd never earn the money to hire Sundown to find her bastard sire.

“Fine,” she said, and bared her teeth a little. “I’ll take the money. But you call me sweetcheeks or babycakes or any of that other crap ever again, I’ll rip your throat out. Understand?”

He started to laugh. Maria growled louder, let her fangs show.

He shut up, and she pushed past him into the night.

Instantly, the sharp, sweet tang of blood came to her on the night air. Strong blood. Really strong, potent, delicious. Maria hadn't fed tonight. She'd been planning vaguely on luring one of the club's patrons out into the back alley and biting him there. Maybe that blond man who seemed so fixated on her.

But someone else was already bleeding. A street fight? Maybe she could get a bit of action there. She rounded the corner to the trash alley at the back of the club, and drew up short. Because right in front of her was that bastard fae, who'd clearly been sent by Sundown to check up on her, and he was fighting with a... a... a *thing* with four arms and slimy green skin.

Shit. She didn't want to get into this fight. She backed away, only to find herself up against something hard and warm.

"Well, well," said a voice in her ear. "Lookie what we have here."

She spun around, fangs out. It was the blond patron, the one who'd been staring at her all night. Only now he didn't look so harmless. Now that she was this close, she felt an otherworldly energy coming from him.

Damning her sire, damning Starne and especially damning Breslin, Maria bared her fangs and made a

vow to work on her paranormal-spotting instincts. “You have a pissed off vampire,” she said.

“Mmm. Been a while since I had me a piece of vampire ass.”

Astonished at his stupidity, Maria stared for a second before she lunged to bite him -- and then he shoved something against her chest that burned so suddenly, so fiercely, that she shrieked.

The fae grinned. “Why’d you believe in your god, little vampire, when you’re so unholy?”

The crucifix burned and smoldered. Maria’s fists clenched, her eyes stinging. If she breathed, she’d have been breathless with pain. In life she’d been a devout Catholic. Now it was coming back to bite her in the ass.

In seconds she was back in that cage, chains burning her wrists and ankles, drugs blurring her vision, men standing over her with stakes and gourds of holy water.

The terror pulsed through her, petrified her.

The fae leered and shoved her back against the wall, tugging at her sequined dress, calling to the green... *thing* , “Ain’t you finished yet?”

As the fae took her trembling hands and pinned them above her head, pressing the crucifix against them and burning her wrists, she managed to turn her head. The green creature was still fighting with the scarred faerie, but the fae was a blur of movement, almost impossible to see. In fact, with her vampire vision fading every second the cross burned into her, she could barely see anything at all. The alley was dark, the air pungent with blood and the stink of the green thing.

The fae had her dress pushed up around her waist now and was pawing at her underwear. The crucifix blistered her wrists. Tears burned her eyes. Her fangs broke the skin of her own lips.

And anger bubbled up inside her. She hadn't survived seventy years in a harem for this! She'd fought greater pain than this. She'd fought more men than this. And she was damn well going to fight *this* !

With a scream, she drew up all her energy and shoved at the fae, who reeled backwards, shocked. "Don't you fucking dare," she snarled, trying to flex her blistered, burning wrists.

"Skalar," the fae called, backing away, "it ain't working..."

Skalar, whatever it was, glanced back and hissed, "I got

prroblemssss off my own, Sssseelie!”

“Hey, you promised me vampire ass if I distracted the Unseelie for ya!”

Maria’s gaze darted to said Unseelie, who slowed enough that she could see him.

“Dirty rotten Seelie,” he muttered, then louder, “Maria, you got a weapon?”

She bared her fangs. “Just these.”

He parried an attack from Skalar. “That won’t do. You need iron --”

Suddenly Skalar whipped out a short sword with a metal handle. “Like this?”

Belatedly, Maria saw that it wore gloves on its hands. Was it some kind of faery? The only fae she’d ever seen had been tall, humanoid and ethereally beautiful. Not short, slimy, four-armed and ugly enough to sour milk.

But as she watched, the Seelie fae rushed her again, leading with the crucifix. She darted, pushing aside the pain in her chest and her hands, and made a dive for Skalar and his sword. Driving her shoulder into the

creature's chest, she shoved him to the ground and felt the sword bite into her back. It hurt, but nowhere near as much as the crucifix had.

Beneath her, Skalar hissed, foul breath clouding her face, and she recoiled in disgust. Three of its arms were around her, holding her there, a third striking her repeatedly with the sword.

“Hey, hold her like that, I’ll do her from behind,” came the Seelie’s voice, and Maria turned to snarl over her shoulder at him. If she could just get that goddamned sword --

“The hell you will,” the Unseelie’s cool voice snapped, and then with a blur he grabbed the Seelie and threw him hard at Maria. Before she could wonder what the hell he was doing, the Seelie screamed and went heavy on her.

Between them, the sword dug into her back.

Pain slashed through Maria. The burns from the crucifix hurt almost more than she could bear, and the loss of the blood seeping from the multiple wounds on her back sapped her strength with every second.

Then the Seelie’s body was abruptly flung away from her, and with an anguished cry from Skalar the sword

vanished, too. Strong hands grasped her shoulders and pulled her away from the slimy creature, hauled her to her feet.

A voice in her head said, *Stand on his arms. Now!*

Too bewildered and hurt to wonder what was going on, Maria obeyed, stamping her boots down on the creature's two left arms. As the Unseelie did the same on its right side, she glanced down and felt a hysterical giggle building inside her. Somewhere along the way she'd lost her mac, and was now standing in sheepskin boots and a sequined dress split halfway up her thigh.

He gave her an odd look, but bent to grasp the arm holding the sword. "Now," he said to the creature, who was writhing and hissing at them, "either you can drop the sword on the floor so Maria can pick it up --"

"Never!" Skalar spat.

"-- or you can hold onto it, and I'll just pull your arm off," the faery continued calmly.

The creature's big black eyes darted between them.

"I'll help him to do it," Maria said. She felt sick, dizzy, too much pain and too much blood loss, but she stood straight, her fangs bared at the odious creature below

her.

The sword clanged on the ground. She darted to pick it up, her head swimming, and made to hand it to the Unseelie.

“No,” he said. “You do it.”

She frowned. In her current state, she was likely to miss. Then she remembered -- of course he couldn't touch the sword. It would burn him like the crucifix had burned her. His cheek already bore the scar of the last time he'd encountered iron. Under his shirt, she was sure he bore more scars.

“Cut its throat,” he added. “Best way to deal with goblins.”

Goblins. Right.

Skalar writhed and wriggled between them, dislodging her balance. She fell to her knees, still pinning the goblin down, and gathered her strength.

Her first stroke missed, but the second caught the creature in the neck, and she dragged the blade across its slimy skin.

It gurgled, and was still.

“Good girl,” the Unseelie said, and stepped off the creature. He turned to inspect the still body of the Seelie fae, kicked it, sniffed at it, and turned back just in time to see Maria pass out.

Chapter Three

“She needs blood,” came the voice on the other end of the phone. “Only way for a vampire to recover from anything is fresh blood.”

“Human?” Ruarc asked, wondering where the hell he’d get any, and why the hell he was even asking.

“Well, it’s preferable. Most vampires aren’t happy drinking animal blood.”

“I’m not doing this to make her happy, Mags,” he said, wiping his hand over his face and glancing back at the bloody form lying on his bed. She was still wearing her

sequined dress, now red with blood.

“So give her pig’s blood. Ruarc, why are you even bothered? I’ll warn you now, you won’t get any thanks from a vampire.”

He stared at Maria for a long time. He didn’t know why. Vaguely, he thought it might be to do with them fighting the goblin and the Seelie together. Maybe. He was too tired to figure it out.

“Does she need to be awake?”

“Not really. She’ll wake up anyway once she tastes the blood.”

“Does she need a lot?” Maybe he could go out and hire a hooker or something to feed her. Find someone homeless. Someone who’d allow themselves to be bitten for money.

“Depends. Pig blood, yes. Human blood, yes.”

“What other kind --”

“Supernatural blood,” Magda said. “She’d only need a few sips of yours or mine.”

Ruarc looked at his own wrist. He’d bled out plenty

tonight. What was a little more?

“Right,” he said distantly. “Thanks, Mags.”

“Ruarc, are you all right?”

“Fine,” he said, then, when it appeared something else was needed, added, “I’m just tired. Early morning here.”

“Yes, I know. It’s not even coffee time here.”

“I’ll let you go then,” Ruarc said, and put the phone down before she could protest. Truth be told, he hadn’t really thought a lot about what time it might be in England. He’d tried calling Chloe and Alexius but got no reply -- they were probably having sex -- and automatically moved to the next name on his list, a werewolf attached to the Sundown office in London.

We really need to get more staff, he thought, moving toward the bed.*Tomorrow. I’ll sort it out tomorrow.*

He sat down on the edge of the bed, loosened his tie and pulled it off. Stripped away his bloody shirt. Watched Maria lying there on her side, very still, not breathing. But then vampires didn’t need to breathe.

There was a cut on his arm, already starting to heal.

Grimacing, wondering again why the hell he was doing this, he forced it open again and held it to her mouth.

Nothing. Frustrated, he smeared blood onto her lips with his fingers, parted them, slipped inside --

-- sucked in a sharp breath as a fang pierced his fingertip. Felt all the blood in his body start to rush to that tiny wound.

Well, not all of it. Some of it rushed south.

Actually, a lot of it rushed south.

Maria's eyes snapped open, huge and dark, all pupil. Deep black holes to suck him in. And they fixed on him, quite suddenly. Just magnetically grabbed him so he couldn't look away.

Her lips were hot, soft, wet, and she sucked his fingers deeper, scoring deep lines with her fangs that really ought to have hurt but just didn't. In fact it was the opposite of pain. The way she was sucking the blood from his fingers felt better than any blow job Ruarc had ever had. And he'd had plenty. Imagine what her mouth could do elsewhere!

His cock hardened so quickly at the thought that it actually did hurt, but Ruarc didn't care. He hardly

noticed. Because Maria was abandoning his fingers, grabbing his arm and piercing the skin of his wrist so his blood flowed faster, stronger, and the rush was unlike anything he'd ever felt.

Blindly, he yanked at her dress, scattering sequins everywhere like falling raindrops. Desperate to feel her skin against his, to touch her soft breasts, palm her sweet round ass, taste her plump nipples. Damn, her breasts were gorgeous. But seeing them wasn't enough, and stroking them wasn't either. He dropped his head and sucked her nipple into his mouth, tearing at the fabric still covering her waist.

Maria held his arm firm to her mouth with one hand, but the other was digging into his shoulder, fingers and thumb kneading his muscles. As he bit none too gently on her nipple, she growled against his flesh and abruptly dropped his arm, baring bloodied fangs at him for a bare instant as she grabbed him and hauled his body back up hers.

For a second, just a second, Ruarc realized he was half-naked with a vampire, and then her fangs tore into his neck and the hot sweet pleasure of it shot through him like a shockwave. Before he even knew what he was doing, he was ripping the rest of her dress away and she was doing the same with his clothes, and then her slick flesh was against his throbbing cock and he was

shoving inside her.

She growled again, an animalistic sound that vibrated through his body, and wrapped one arm around his neck, and slid the other down to grip his ass as he thrust deep. Her nails broke his skin. Ruarc surged in time with the pulse thundering through him, a pulse she was controlling. He was nearly blind with lust, desperate to push deeper, faster and harder. Her hips bucked against him, her hot wet pussy the slickest, tightest thing he'd ever felt.

His blood was roaring now, deafening him. Completely oblivious to everything but the sensations of Maria's lips, her fangs, her skin, her cunt, her tight nipples, her soft skin, he hurtled out of control. Overdosing on pleasure, he shuddered like a junkie with every thrust.

When Maria's hips bucked, her body spasming, her teeth tearing deeper, it sent Ruarc into the stratosphere, coming harder than he ever had before.

* * *

For what seemed like hours, Maria lay there with the faery sprawled over her, surrounded by the tattered remains of their clothes, her head spinning. He was breathing hard and she was surprised to discover she was too. Her heart was hammering.

Had she just had sex with a faery ?

Not just any sex. The best sweaty, desperate, incredible sex she'd ever had.

He shifted above her, taking the weight off her body. Sliding his smooth faery skin against hers. Brushing her jaw with his shadow stubble. Everything felt extra-sensitive.

Maria squeezed her eyes shut. Oh hell. And this wasn't just any faery. This was a faery who knew she'd been imprisoned in a harem for years. Knew she'd been rented out to rich perverts. Had seen her chained, drugged and screaming. Had watched her when she'd been pawed and beaten and fucked.

Suddenly feeling claustrophobic, she shoved him away and lurched upright, hugging her knees, gasping for air she didn't need. The room was bright, far too bright, every color a blazing fluorescent tone.

“Maria?”

His faery blood sparkled in her veins. Her head spun.

“Are you all right?”

She bit down on her own lip and forced herself to be calm. She was out of the zoo now. Starne was dead. Breslin more so. No one had tied her down or forced her to do anything.

She'd had sex with the faery of her own free will.

Well, mostly. Bloodlust didn't count.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice a little husky.

"Are you... uh, feeling better?"

She looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"Your back," he clarified, and her hand moved over her shoulder absently, feeling for cuts that weren't there any more. "I, er. You were on your back and I... I didn't think. It was..." He took a deep breath, and Maria stared, incredulous. Was he actually nervous? "It was thoughtless of me. I'm sorry."

She blinked. He had just apologized to her. A faery had just apologized to a vampire.

Well, he'd just had mind-blowing sex with her too. It appeared to be a day for firsts.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, wincing, and Maria flexed

her back muscles, ran her hands over the unbroken skin in wonder.

“No,” she said. “It doesn’t.” She turned, showed him. “That’s some pretty potent blood you’ve got there.”

Faery blood. No wonder she felt like she was on drugs.

Her wrists still felt sore from the crucifix burns, and as she touched her chest she felt the outline of the cross burned into her flesh. Terrific. Unsteadily, she moved to the edge of the bed and made to stand up, but she wobbled and didn’t make it.

“Whoa!” The faery caught her as she toppled, and pulled her back onto the bed, his body warm against her back. “You’re not all right.”

“I’m fine.” She struggled against him, her head swimming. A single push sent him sprawling on the bed and she gained her feet, eyes closed. Damn, he had terrible taste in décor. Why was everything so damn bright? “It’s your horrible bedroom.”

“My bedroom?” He sounded puzzled. “What’s horrible about it?”

“Did you decorate in the dark or something?”

There was a short silence. Maria risked opening her eyes, and a rainbow of colors assaulted her. Ultramarine walls with black accents; lurid purple hangings on the bed; floorboards painted white and so glossy they reflected every single light. A painting on the far wall that was so bright it would probably glow in the dark. The sheets on the bed were heavy black linen and she could count every thread with her fingers.

“I’m Unseelie,” he replied eventually. “I like the dark.”

“Then why are your walls the color of a paddling pool?”

Another pause. “They’re pale blue,” the faery said.

“No, they’re bright -- I don’t know, turquoise or something.” She closed her eyes again. This place was making her dizzy. “I need to -- where are my clothes?”

“Ah,” the faery said, and she opened her eyes to see him holding a few pieces of fabric that glittered so brightly she flinched. They were spattered with something a vivid bright red.

“What is that?”

“Your dress. I’m sorry. I’ll buy you a --”

“That is not my dress.”

He looked at it, then at her. “Yes, it is. I distinctly remember you wearing it.”

For a second, his eyes blazed and his gaze swept over her in a way that reminded Maria she was totally naked. And that he’d recently been raking more than his eyes over her body.

She lifted her chin, causing the room to tilt and swirl. “My dress is not that color. And what is that red stuff?”

“Er. Blood.”

“Blood is not that color.” She snorted. “It looks like something from a movie. It’s probably ketchup or something.”

He was looking at her very strangely. “It isn’t --”

“Don’t you argue with me about blood. I’m a vampire, remember?”

“Yes, I remember.” He touched the wound on his neck.

A wound, she noticed, that was also a bright, vivid red.

Her heart beat slowly for a few moments as she looked him over. Bright, bright red blood. Skin so white it glowed like the moon. Blue veins beneath. His eyes gleamed an unearthly cerulean. Dark hair, several months past needing a cut, shone blue-black in the pale spotlights. The scar on his cheek was a dark red slash.

Everything about him was as vividly colored as the bedroom décor. Which figured, Maria told herself, since he was fae, and therefore couldn't be expected to look normal.

But the blood...

Maybe fae blood was usually bright red. But her own? The smears on her own body?

The colors of the room swooped and swirled around her and she felt the soft sheets against her skin before she realized she'd fallen.

"What did you do to me?" she breathed, her arm over her eyes. The colors still swirled, flashing in the darkness behind her eyelids.

"I didn't do anything."

“You drugged me. This is like... like one of those psychedelic drugs. Everything is too bright, everything is moving...”

Cool hands touched her, moved her into the center of the bed, covered her with sheets. Gentle hands. Even the faery’s voice was cool as he said, “It’s probably my blood. You probably took too much. Supernatural blood is apparently very potent for vampires.”

“Really?” Maria tried to inject more sarcasm into her voice, but failed.

“Look, just lie still a while, maybe it’ll wear off.”

He was being strangely helpful, she thought as she heard him move away. Why did he care how she felt? She was a vampire. Faeries hated vampires. This much had been made painfully clear to her.

But he’d also fought on her side, slain her attacker and fed her his blood.

Maria buried her head in the pillow, her blood pumping hard and fast, and tried to get some sleep.

Chapter Four

Winter sunshine bathed Ruarc's apartment in cool light as he stared out at the city below, hands braced on the double-height window that ran the full length of his living room.

He didn't know why he hadn't gone into work this morning. Well, he knew why: it was because Maria was still lying in his bed, sleeping off the drugging effects of his blood.

But he didn't know why that meant he had to stay. She was a big girl, and he could leave her. Or he could take her back to her place.

Yeah, right, he thought, remembering the seedy bar she'd been singing in. She'll be living in a really nice place.

Again, why did he care?

Anyway, now the sun was fully up he couldn't take her anywhere. She was stuck here. And... and... and he

didn't want to leave a strange woman, especially a vampire, alone in his apartment.

That must be it.

He'd called in and told Chloe he was exhausted after his meeting with the Queen, so he'd be working from home. It wasn't a lie: he *was* exhausted, and in truth his head was pounding... but neither fact had anything to do with the Queen.

Then he'd sat and stared at his computer, which was still in its box, for twenty minutes before giving up and grabbing a notepad and telephone instead.

Truth be told, he still wasn't comfortable with the whole phone thing either. Anything more complex than a bottle-opener was more technology than he liked. Chloe called him a technophobe. The London office called him a Luddite. Ruarc considered himself to be fairly technologically advanced for a species that could fly, teleport, and on occasion mind-read. What the hell was the point of a fax machine when you could move a piece of paper with your mind?

He sighed and pushed himself away from the glass. Enough procrastination. The light was making his headache worse. Grabbing the phone, he dialed the London office.

“Sundown, Inc. How can I help?” purred a sexy female voice with a strong Caribbean accent.

“Is Magda there, please?”

“No, she’s taking her kids to the vet.”

He blinked. “Vet?”

“That’s what I said.”

Werewolves.

“Right. Okay, well -- who is this?”

“That depends,” she said, “on who this is.”

Ruarc rolled his eyes. Honestly, you could hardly conjure anything by a name. “I’d like to speak to Con Marks, please.”

There was an intake of breath. “Con Marks? We don’t have a Con Marks.”

“He goes by another name.” But Ruarc couldn’t use it.

“And what name would that be?”

His fist clenched. He couldn't say it, because giving something the wrong name was a kind of lying. And he couldn't lie.

And she knew this.

“Look,” he said, “just tell Con I called, and --”

“Okay, and what's your name?”

“Ruarc.”

“Ruarc what?”

He closed his eyes a second. Sighed. “Ruarc of the Unseelie.”

“Ha!” said the woman at the other end. “I knew you were! Renk faery bakra!”

Ruarc held the phone away from his ear as she spat at him some more in a language he only half understood, and eventually hung up on him.

Evidently she'd heard about Con and his Unseelie problems.

Dammit.

Uttering his tenth sigh of the morning, he dialed Alexius's number and lay back on the sofa, eyes closed. The sun was making his head pound.

“Yeah.”

Ruarc mentally added *Get Alexius to answer the phone professionally* to his list of crap to be sorted out, and rubbed at his temples. “Alexius. You used to work out of London, right?”

“Right.”

“Can you call them for me?”

A slight pause. “Why can't you?”

“I tried. Who do they have answering phones there, girl with a Caribbean accent?”

“Ah. That would be Lily, the pirate queen.”

“Pirate queen?” His headache was getting worse. Lily's name was familiar but he had no idea why.

“Yep. Let me guess, she was less than civil to you?”

“As soon as she heard my name. She have something against faeries?”

“One of them imprisoned her in a fishing float for three hundred years.”

Eibhlis. “Oh.*That* Lily.”

“And she’s engaged to Con Devlin... who, as he tells it, was once the Unseelie butt-monkey. His words.”

Ruarc winced. “Nothing to do with me.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Would I lie? Alexius, I need a favor. Can you call her for me, please, and see if London can lend us anyone, just until we can hire some more staff? We need someone to deal with vampire and werewolf clients, and a witch or wizard wouldn’t go amiss, either.”

There was a pause. Ruarc knew Alexius was running through a mental list of the London office’s staff.

“Unlikely,” he said finally. “Rome might be a better bet.”

“Can you call them for me? I really feel like hell.”

“Rough night?” Alexius’s voice held a smile.

“You wouldn’t believe it.”

He signed off and lay back on the sofa. Probably he ought to get up and pull the drapes across the window. Being Unseelie meant that the sun wasn’t his friend when he was feeling low -- and right now, he felt like shit run over twice.

Had he really fought off a goblin attack last night? Had he really let a vampire bite him? Had he really had sex with her? What the hell had he been thinking? She was *avampire* . She hated faeries. Well, actually she appeared to hate everyone -- but she was sort of genetically programmed to hate him especially.

And he’d had sex with her. The most incredible, heart-pounding --

Right then, a thump came from the upstairs door leading to his bedroom, and he groaned.

“*Maricón!*” came the bellow of the woman whose breasts he’d been licking a few hours before. “You better not be out there, faery!”

So, she was feeling better.

“Because if I find you’re out there and you’ve locked me in here, I am going to drain every drop of sparkly

blood from your body,” she yelled.

He rolled his eyes and sat up. “Maria?”

Another thump. “You are so dead,*maricón* !”

“Sleep well?” he called.

A stream of Spanish, mostly obscene, was his reply. Ruarc stood up, his head throbbing, and made his way to the window to close the curtains.

“You better let me out, faery!”

“Why, so you can drain my blood? That’s not much of an incentive.” He closed the first of four huge curtains. The comparative darkness was blissful.

“How dare you lock me in!” she screamed.

Ruarc grabbed the second curtain. “Because it’s daylight, and you’re a vampire, and I have a wall of windows.”

There was a short silence.

“You didn’t need to lock the door,” she said eventually.

Ruarc drew the third curtain across the window. “If I hadn’t, and you’d just opened it, then you’d be toast.” He considered this. “Maybe I should have left it unlocked,” he added.

More Spanish.

He took the fourth curtain and tugged it across the window. The fabric was thick, dark velvet, lined with blackout material. Daylight was all very well and good, but sometimes an Unseelie just needed the darkness.

Feeling better already, he padded up the steps to the mezzanine level where his bedroom was. He could feel her on the other side of the door, a dark moody presence, angry and buzzing with energy.

“Maria?”

She growled.

“Why are you calling *memaricón* ? You know I’m not gay.”

“But you are a faery,” she sneered. “And I know you like other men. I saw you in the -- I saw you!”

Yeah, okay, she’d seen him in Starne’s zoo. Seen him happily fucking his faery cellmates -- male and female.

So what? Most faeries did.

“What color are the walls in there?”

Silence. Ruarc pressed his hand against the door, feeling her there. She was leaning against the wood, separated from him by an inch or two. He felt her anger, pulsing like a living heart. Felt her fear. Felt her... vulnerability.

“Maria?”

“Pale blue,” she muttered. “You have stupid blood, you know?”

“It’s always worked fine for me.”

He turned the key, and she darted away, diving under the covers just as he opened the door. He caught a glimpse of dark honey skin before she disappeared totally, and shook himself. Now was not the time to remember how that dark honey skin had tasted. Had felt, sliding against him. Had smelled, a delicious scent filling his senses like --

“Hey! You said it was sunlight out there!”

Ruarc shook himself again. “It was,” he said. “I closed the drapes.”

She peeked out at him from under the covers, her thick dark hair mussed, her big eyes gleaming in the darkness. Her skin glowed -- with, he realized, the after-effects of his blood.

She licked her lips, and his cock hardened. Inexplicably. Okay, she was kind of attractive, for a vampire. But he'd seen more beautiful women. Had bedded hundreds of them. Had been raised surrounded by them.

By beautiful fae women...

His eyes narrowed. "How long have you been singing at that club?"

Confusion hit her first. He felt her emotions like he'd been plugged into her. Then confusion turned to suspicion. "Why do you want to know that?"

Ruarc pinched the bridge of his nose. He wasn't entirely sure, but... "Last night. The Seelie who attacked you said you were his reward --"

Those luminous eyes of hers narrowed. Her fangs gleamed.

"-- for distracting me," Ruarc finished. "How did they

know I was going to be there, at that club?”

She shrugged. “You don’t go there often?”

“I don’t go to Brooklyn often. I’m not a fan of jazz clubs.”

“Then what were you doing there last night?”

He leaned in the doorway. Knowing she was naked under there wasn’t helping him think. “I felt something... something off.”

She raised one eyebrow, sitting up and pulling the sheets over herself. Her breasts moved in interesting ways beneath the fine linen.

“Something dangerous. And I also smelled a Seelie.”

“A what? That slimy thing with the arms?”

“That was a goblin. The guy who...went after you, he was Seelie.”

She gave an impatient shrug. Her breasts moved interestingly again.

“The other fae court. The Seelie are summer creatures. They’re made of light and warmth. Finding him this far

north in winter, in the middle of the night, just felt wrong.”

She cocked her head. “The ‘other’ fae court? What are you?”

“Unseelie.” At her gesture, he explained, “The opposite of Seelie. We represent... darkness. Winter. Cold.”

“And the two courts? You’re enemies?”

“Yes. Well, no. Well... it’s complicated.”

She looked bored. “And what about the slimy thing? The goblin? What court is he?”

“He’s not. Goblins are Wildfae -- they don’t belong to a court. Sometimes their allegiance can be bought though.”

“Great. So the Seelie faery hired the goblin to kill you.” She picked angrily at the sheet across her lap. “Outside my club.”

“Yes... your club.” Ruarc frowned, and asked again, “How long have you been singing there?”

“That was my first night.” She scowled at him. “And

probably my last, thanks to you.”

“Why, what’d I do?”

She stared at him incredulously. “What did you do? You turned up and almost got me killed!”

“It’s not my fault --”

“No, it is. I heard that guy say I was his... his...*reward*,” she spat the word, “for distracting you, so the goblin could kill you.”

“But how did they know you’d be there?”

“I don’t know!” she yelled. “Don’t you faeries have any extra senses? You said you smelled that Seelie. Can’t a faery smell a vampire?”

Against his own wishes, Ruarc breathed in. *She smelled like sex* .

Wordless, he nodded.

“Well, then. He just picked out the nearest vampire that wouldn’t be a threat --” she broke off, her eyes nervously darting away from his. “The first vampire who was alone,” she corrected.

Ruarc closed his eyes, because she was damn distracting sitting there all naked and glowing and smelling delicious. “No,” he said. “It’s still not right. I felt...”

He opened his eyes, and she was glaring at him mutinously. She didn’t care what he felt. Didn’t care that he’d felt something dangerous, and something incongruous, and had attributed the two to different things -- vampire and Seelie.

But he wasn’t feeling danger from her now. And he hadn’t in the alley. The dangerous thing was the goblin.

The goblin that had hired the Seelie to cover for the incongruity. Because Ruarc wouldn’t be feeling any specific danger from the Seelie.

But why go to all that trouble?

His headache was returning, with interest. Ruarc pushed away from the wall and headed to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face.

“Hey, faery?”

She stood there in the doorway, a sheet wrapped around her naked body, watching him. He looked up.

And she said... nothing. Silence stretched between them. Ruarc could feel her curiosity pushing at him, but she didn't ask him anything.

Finally she shook her head. "Clothes," she said. "I need clothes."

"That's not what you were going to say."

Her jaw clenched. She squared her shoulders, which had the unfortunate effect of pushing her breasts out. "How do you know what I was going to say?"

Because I'm a bloody telepath. Yeah, she'd love that.

He shrugged, trying to ignore the thrust of her soft breasts against the sheet. Why the hell was she affecting him so much? It wasn't as if he hadn't seen her naked before. For five years he'd watched her prowling around her cell, naked and proud, scowling and spitting. He'd thought back then she was beautiful -- for a vampire, anyway.

"If you want to leave," he said, gesturing to the doorway. "I'm not keeping you."

A shadow crossed her face at that. Bad choice of words.

“And where am I supposed to go?” she said. “It’s full daylight out there.” She gathered the sheet around her again, and Ruarc tried not to notice the way her breasts swayed as she bent to pick it up.

“Okay then. Go when it’s dark.” He tried to look like he didn’t care. But that wasn’t easy, because it was a lie. He did care. He wanted her to stay here, to drop that sheet, spread those succulent thighs and let him plunge back inside her again. He wanted her to drop to her knees and take his aching cock in her hot dark mouth. He wanted to suckle her sweet plump nipples.

His headache pounding full force, he swiped those thoughts from his mind in case he accidentally broadcast them to her. She’d probably kill him for them. And right now, his head throbbing, his body aching from last night’s fight and unable to heal at its usual rate due to the blood she’d sucked from him, he really didn’t think he’d be able to stop her.

“Do what you want,” he said, and pushed past her to crash on the bed.

Chapter Five

Maria stood staring at the faery's closed bedroom door, more than a little confused.

Faeries wereweird .

She paced slowly down the stairs into the huge open-plan living space of his apartment. Midnight blue curtains covered one whole double-height wall -- she could feel the heat of the sun behind them. So he hadn't been kidding about keeping the bedroom door closed.

Her unpracticed, unfamiliar eye had no idea what sort of furniture might be considered expensive or stylish in the early twenty-first century, but she could at least tell that the apartment was attractively furnished, decorated in pale, cool colors. Paler than the mad bright swirls that had assaulted her earlier. Now, after sleeping off some of the excess of his highly potent blood, at least she didn't feel like she was hallucinating any more.

She felt powerful. Vaguely, she wondered if other vampires knew the effect faery blood had on them.

Trailing through the apartment, she found a couple of

large cardboard boxes spilling foam chippings everywhere. They seemed to hold computer components. Well, they were no use to her. She'd never seen a computer before she became a vampire, and she hadn't had the time or opportunity to learn much about them since.

There was a kitchen, all appliances gleaming like they were brand new. So he was one of those Upper East Side Manhattanites who ate out every night, was he? Figured.

Frowning, she found her way back to the huge living area and sat down on one gigantic sofa, tucking her sheet around her. What the hell she was going to wear when night fell and she could leave, she had no idea. But then again, she'd seen worse outfits than this on the street every day.

Fashions tended to change after seventy years.

Closing her eyes, she let her mind drift. Back across the country, back across the years. A small town in California -- a town now swallowed by the LA sprawl. Dusty streets. Hot sun. A tinny wireless on the counter of the diner. Shoes that hurt her feet, made her back ache as she served coffees and burgers until the sun went down.

She curled into a ball, remembering what she'd remembered every night since. Remembered despite wanting desperately to forget.

But it was hard to forget your own murder.

“I don't want you walking home by yourself. There are bad men on the streets. Only last week there was a girl murdered twenty miles away. They come out from the big city and prey on young girls like you. Out in Los Angeles where they're all lawless. And a pretty girl like you, *querida* , you'll be a target. Promise me you'll wait for me or your mother, or get one of the other girls to walk with you.”

And she'd promised. Had promised her father every day. *Yes, Papa, I'll be careful. No, Papa, I won't flirt with any of the customers. Of course, Papa, I'm saving myself for marriage .*

Well, that one had been true at least. Much good it had done her. There she'd been, too frightened of the consequences of having sex before marriage, but perfectly confident of walking home by herself. It was half a dozen blocks. What harm could possibly come to her?

She flinched as she remembered the dark shape looking from a service alley between two buildings.

She'd kept on walking, a little faster now, her heels tip-tapping on the paving slabs. Silence followed her. The wrong kind of silence.

When she glanced back, there was no one there. No one in front of her. No one following her.

It was no one who ripped her throat out.

She still remembered the bone-crushing fear, the pain ripping through her, the bubbles of blood in her throat, the mindless panic as she felt her life escaping. The dark flash of her attacker's eyes. The gleam of sharp teeth in the moonlight.

The soft laughter ringing in her ears as she faded away. And those words, the last her human ears ever heard. The words she heard every night in her nightmares.

“Yes, she'll do nicely...”

Maria didn't realize she was crying until she felt soft fingers wipe away her tears. Her eyes opened, saw the darkness of dreamtime, the dull gleam of skin, too dark to see details. There were arms around her. A soft voice soothing her.

Shh. It's all right. It's all okay.

His arms were around her. Strong arms. Maria had never dreamed this before, but she didn't especially care. She'd fantasized about a pair of strong arms to hold her, a hard chest to lay her head against, gentle fingers stroking her hair -- but she'd never actually had such a man turn up to comfort her after a nightmare.

She tucked her head under his chin, felt the rasp of his stubble against her forehead.

You were having a nightmare? he said, gently, questioningly.

She nodded. Shook her head. *I was... remembering. Re-living .*

A gentle touch on her neck. She'd no idea if the scar was still visible or not. She could feel it, a slight raised weal, the tear in her flesh where fangs had ripped into her. But she hadn't seen her reflection since that night. Could hardly remember what she looked like any more.

The vampire who turned you?

She nodded again, her eyes burning with tears.

How old were you?

She wrapped her arms around his neck, nestled closer.

Eighteen .

Hell. Soft lips brushed the top of her head. You were so young. I had no idea...

Maria didn't want to hear. Didn't want to explain it, didn't want to rehash it. She just wanted the comfort of this man's arms, his hard body and his gentle touch. His soft lips. She lifted her head, cupped his face. She couldn't see him in the darkness, but she didn't need to see him to brush her lips over his. To feel the softness of his mouth against hers. To taste him. The sweet taste of kindness.

And because it was a dream, she didn't worry that she wasn't doing it right. After all, not counting a rather chaste peck in the schoolyard when she was eleven, Maria had never kissed anyone before. She'd been kept under strict rules by her father, and then...

No. She didn't want to think about *and then* . She just wanted to kiss him.

His lips were full and soft. She ran her tongue over them, over the seam that parted, inviting her inside. The rough stubble on his jaw abraded her lips, her chin, but she was surprised to realize it felt good.

Her hand lay against his cheek. She felt the strong

bones of his face, as she held him to her. He didn't rush her, didn't push her, just let her kiss him, let her tongue slip past his soft lips and taste him.

He tasted good.

Thank you, his soft voice laughed, and Maria felt herself blush hotly as she realized she'd said that out loud. No, thought it out loud. Her mouth was sealed to his. She couldn't say anything. Didn't want to.

You taste good too, he told her, his hands making light circles on her back. She was naked, she realized, curled against him, and he was naked too. Very much so.

She shifted. Oh yes. *Very* much so.

She kissed him on and on, becoming bolder, tasting him with broad sweeps of her tongue, investigating and conquering. Her skin prickled with desire, with a need to be closer to him. To press her whole body against his.

She'd never felt like this before. Never had such a burning desire to touch and feel, at least not without her fangs buried in someone's artery. Right now she had no desire to bite, to feed. She just wanted to feel all of this man's body against hers.

Maria wriggled in his lap, parted her thighs to wrap around him, pressing her body intimately closer to his. That very large naked cock that had been pressing against her hip was now pressing between her thighs, up to her belly. Christ, he was big. And hard.

And that fueled her desire even more.

As she shifted and writhed closer, her nipples rubbed across his chest. It felt exquisite. He was so hard, so primitively male, so strong and solid. His arms wrapped around her, fingers kneading her shoulders, her back, caressing and stroking, holding her close to him as he kissed her on and on.

I could kiss you forever, she thought, and his chuckle ran through her head.

No complaints from me, sweetheart.

His hand slipped down to her buttocks, long fingers cupping her round ass, squeezing it. Molding her to him. Pressed her against his hard cock, making her writhe, arch her hips to press her sensitive flesh against him. She was wet, slippery with wanting, and as she moved she slid against him, up and down. Feeling the hard shaft glide between her delicate folds, back and forth, made her dizzy.

His lips left hers, but before she could really protest, he was brushing kisses down her neck, making her shiver. One hand cupped her breast, and then he was kissing her there, tiny butterfly kisses, little licks and nibbles. He paid attention to the whole of her breast, but not her nipple, where she really wanted him. Where she was aching to be touched. Now she was no longer pressed against his chest, rubbing herself against him like a shameless kitten, there was no friction and her nipples ached, tingling and desperate to be touched.

Stop torturing me! She grabbed his head, her fingers tangling in thick silky hair, and tried to move him where she wanted him, but while his laughter echoed in her head, he remained immovable.

But his other hand still cupped her ass, stroking and kneading, and pressed her closer to his hips. His fingers slid down, stroking the top of her thigh where it curved into her buttock, dipping between her thighs but still never touching her where she really wanted it.

Maria's pussy throbbed. She wanted to be touched, stroked, filled, wanted to be licked and sucked and worshipped. Her whole body was as tight as a piano wire.

You want me to lick you? came his voice, and she realized once again that she'd forgotten to keep that to

herself. His tongue traced patterns on the side of her breast.

Yes, but not there, she told him desperately.

You don't like it?

Stop teasing me!

He laughed once again, and then suddenly without warning he took her nipple in his mouth, sucked hard, and slid his fingers into her pussy.

Maria sucked in a breath so sharp it was audible.

Is this better? he asked innocently.

She squeaked in reply. Inside his mouth, he swirled his tongue over her nipple. His free hand played with her other breast, rolling and stroking and pinching. Between her legs it seemed as if he'd had a dozen fingers, and they'd all found somewhere really good.

He stroked her clit, circling, rubbing, pressing hard. He scissored her labia between two fingers and rubbed, back and forth, until her head fell back and she whimpered. He pushed inside her, coating his fingers with her slick wetness, filling her a little but not nearly enough.

More, she moaned. More!

Happily, he said, and lifted his head from her breast.

That's not more, that's -- oh.

His laughter filled her head.

OH.

Maria was by no means a virgin, but like the chirpy pop song she'd heard the other day from someone's radio, she damn well felt like one. Sure as hell no one had ever done this to her before. No one had ever parted her thighs, ducked between them, and licked her from ass to clit.

His hand, slick with her own wetness, caressed her heavy breasts, her tight nipples. His fingers thrust steadily into her throbbing pussy. And his tongue -- oh, sweet merciful God, his tongue! Where a minute ago his fingers had stroked and pinched and rubbed and played, now his lips and tongue danced instead. He sucked on her clit. He nibbled on her labia. He made swirling abstract patterns all over, just licking and licking.

Maria's toes curled. They actually curled. Breathless,

she clutched at him. She was about to come for maybe the fourth or fifth time in her life, and if the build-up was anything to go by, she was going to come harder than all the other times put together.

I'm not even nearly started yet, he told her, and she exploded.

Ruarc held her as she trembled with the aftermath of her orgasm. He still wasn't sure if this dreamtime was real -- if he'd wake up and have her scent on his fingers, his body -- or if it was all in their heads. It sure as hell felt real.

It was her dream, he knew that. A side-effect of telepathy, he'd discovered, was the tendency to drift into people's dreams every now and then. He could pull himself out, he knew, if he wanted -- but why the hell would he want to?

She's a vampire, said a tiny voice inside him.

I don't care, he told it.

And he didn't. He might have, if he hadn't heard her crying. Felt her pain. Seen her memories. He flinched, thinking about the bastard vampire who'd ripped her

throat out and drained her vibrant life. He'd clearly felt her fear, her panic, her misery and confusion.

Vampire or not, she was in real pain.

The sex was something of an accident. He'd honestly meant to just hold her and comfort her. Only somewhere along the line they'd both ended up naked, and she'd started kissing him and... well. Here he was with her heels digging into his back and his tongue wrapped around her clit.

He gave her another lick, was rewarded with another shudder, and lifted his head. It was too dark to see her -- presumably her preference, seeing as it was her dream -- but he could see the gleam of her sweat-dampened skin as her breasts rose and fell.

He kissed her stomach, feeling the muscles jump under her skin.*More?*

Her laughter sounded ragged.*I'm not sure I could take more .*

Wimp.

I am no such thing.

Lazily, he dipped a finger in and out of her hot pussy,

enjoying the way she tightened around him. *Sure?* He feathered a light kiss on her clit, making her shake.

That I'm not a wimp?

You'll have to prove it to me, he told her, sucking her labia into his mouth. She really did taste delicious. His fingers caressed the sweet curve of her thigh where it turned into her buttock. She was completely luscious.

I-- she gasped --I guess I could .

He dipped his tongue inside her. *Atta girl .*

Her skin was so velvety soft. In the darkness, deprived of sight, he felt everything else so much more keenly. Tasted the salty sweetness of her, heard every tiny gasp, grew mildly addicted to the slide of her damp skin against his.

Her fingers tangled in his hair and she bucked her hips against him. Ground her pussy into his mouth. With every lick and bite he felt the tension in her wind higher, felt the muscles quiver beneath her skin as he cupped her glorious round behind. She gasped, moaned, and if she hadn't been a vampire he'd have been worried about her ability to breathe.

She was just about to come when he lifted his head and

stopped. For a second she froze, then her heel dug into his back and she tried to push him back down again.

But Ruarc didn't want her to come just yet. He wanted to feel those sweet, tight pussy muscles convulsing around him. Wanted to bury his rock-hard, aching cock in her slick heat. Wanted to hold her against him as she shuddered to another climax.

He slid up her body, dragging himself against her wet pussy, rubbing his skin against her sensitized flesh. She whimpered. Writhed. He kissed her breast, made a little diversion to suck on her nipple, then moved up to her neck, licking the sweat from her skin.

Her thigh slid against his hip. She grasped his buttocks, pulling him closer, pressing her slippery folds against him. Tempting him with her heat.

Ruarc rested there a moment, his cheek against hers, his cock about to push inside her, just savoring the moment. The anticipation. Feeling her body beneath his, the rise and fall of her perfect breasts, the impatient shimmy of her hips.

Then she bucked and the head of his cock slipped inside her, and he was lost. He thrust hard and deep, taking her completely, drowning himself in her wet heat.

She gasped beneath him, and he wondered for a terrible second if he'd hurt her, but then she flexed and wrapped her legs tight around him, her lips on his neck. Her body stretched, arching against him like a cat, and he swore he heard her purring inside his head.

More, she told him, and more was what he gave her. He thrust hard, fast, each slide of her slick flesh against his driving him higher. Her fingers dug in his back, her nails scoring his skin. Her teeth nipped at his neck, but she never bit him. Never took blood. Ruarc figured she didn't need to: both of them were crazy enough as it was. Every clench of her tight muscles around him made him hotter; every deep slide inside her made her shake.

Her body tensed, every possible part of her wrapped tight around him, and as he thrust deep one last time he felt the ripple of her muscles around him, felt her convulse, tighten, and finally shatter in his arms.

He felt her come apart, felt every ripple and shudder, heard every gasp and tiny cry, and then her pleasure overloaded his senses, hijacked his mind, and he came too, a long, blinding moment of breathless perfection.

Chapter Six

Ruarc woke to find the apartment dark and silent. His bed was empty of any red-hot vampires.

But he felt her presence, out in the living room, and when he stumbled to the landing and looked down at the sofa, there she was, curled under the sheet she'd taken from his bed. It had slid down, exposing her breasts, and despite the mind-blowing orgasm he'd just had in dreamtime, his cock got hard again.

She was beautiful in sleep, her dark hair tangled around her shoulders, her lashes making shadows on her cheeks. Her nipples were plump, soft and dark, and he ached to feel them under his fingers again, suck them into his mouth.

But if he went down there now and did just that, she'd probably kill him.

Swallowing hard, he went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He needed to get rid of this

hard-on, rid of this temporary obsession with the succulent vampire sleeping downstairs. He had bigger things to worry about now. A business to run. A goblin attack to unravel.

But all he wanted to do was bury himself in her delicious pussy and thrust until he came so hard he couldn't see. Again.

He soaped himself, imagining her here with him. Imagining running the bar of soap over her full, round breasts, feeling her nipples pucker under his touch. Thought about how that silky soft skin would feel with water running over it.

Remembered her soft lips on his, imagined them parted, swollen from his kisses, as she knelt on the shower floor. Gave into his imagination and fisted his cock, pretending she was there sucking him, swallowing him, taking every inch of him as he thrust between those sinful lips.

He stroked his balls, pretending his fingers were hers. Slicked one finger and rimmed his own ass, leaning back against the cool shower wall, his eyes closed.

He wanted to bend over and thrust into that tight pussy from behind. Wanted to stretch out on his back and watch her ride him. Wanted to shove her up against the

wall and take her hard and fast, over and over.

Dammit, he thought as he spilled his seed into his own hand, he just wanted her.

The ringing phone yanked Maria from sleep. Hell, but she'd been having sweet dreams. The first time in seventy years she'd not woken angry and miserable from a remembrance of her turning.

A smile curved her lips. The mind-bending eroticism of said dream might have had something to do with that.

She stretched, wondering if the faery was going to answer his phone. The ringing was coming from a console on a table a few feet away, but he was nowhere in sight.

Then, suddenly, he was. With a fluttering sound, a blur of movement just outside her vision, he suddenly appeared and grabbed the phone, glaring at the handset.

“Chloe?”

Maria stared. He was totally naked, and dripping wet. Strong, lean thighs, a perfectly chiseled butt, tight and

curved in all the right places, a back thick with gleaming pale muscles leading up to broad shoulders, stiff with tension.

A droplet of water trickled down his spine and trembled on his buttocks. Maria caught herself licking her lips as she watched it.

“Yes, I wanted to know if they could lend us anyone. But the girl who answered the phone is... well, she doesn't like faeries.”

Then she's an idiot, Maria thought, and the faery in question spun around to pin her with his gaze.

Oh, my. Okay, so she'd seen him naked before, but... heavens. She hadn't really had time to *look*. It wasn't just the defined pecs, the toned belly, thick cock hanging between his legs. It was the sharp relief of his collarbone, the slope of his hipbones and the narrow line of hair pointing south.

His skin gleamed with an unearthly paleness, his hair darker than midnight, tousled and wet about his neck. His strong jaw was shadowed with stubble. His eyes flashed with blue sparks. On his hip, a dark scar gleamed, matching the one on his cheek. There were smaller ones on his chest, his shoulders, his arms, faded scars. Somehow they made him look more perfect.

Maria's hand curled into a fist, her nails denting her palm. It was just because she'd had such a spicy dream, she told herself. She couldn't help waking up hot. And he was beautiful, even if he was also a bastard fae. She could objectively appreciate his beauty. Like appreciating a painting.

Yes. Just a painting.

He looked angry about something. "For Christ's sake, Chloe, how could you forget to tell me that? Did you at least book them a hotel?"

Evidently her answer was in the negative, as he kicked the side of the sofa and scowled.

"I'd ask if you could put them up but you're probably too busy shagging. When do they get in?" He grabbed a pen and notepad and scribbled something down. "Right, and I don't suppose you have a contact number? Halle-bloody-lujah." He wrote that down too, then paused, listening.

Maria found herself staring at the dip in the side of each perfect buttock, and shook herself.

The faery sighed. "It's all right. At least you told me eventually. Chloe, don't cry --" he broke off, wincing,

and rubbed a hand over his face. “Just... go home, take a bath or whatever. Eat someone. You’ll feel better.”

When he put the phone down he turned back to Maria, still scowling. It suited him unfairly well.

“Eat someone?” she said.

“Siren.”

“Ah.”

“You don’t want a job as secretary, do you?”

“A faery offering a job to a vampire?” Maria said scathingly, not allowing herself to believe for a second he might actually mean it. A job with Sundown would be the answer to a lot of her problems.

“You couldn’t be worse than Chloe. She’s usually too busy having sex to answer the phone and when she does, she never remembers to pass messages on. They arranged this weeks ago. I wish she’d goddamned told me.”

“Chloe... from the...?”

“Yeah.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “She’s not that bad, really,” he acknowledged. “And to be fair, she’

s not supposed to be answering the phone.”

“Then why are you mad at her?”

“Because she’s just informed me I have three vampires flying in from Rome in --” he glanced at a clock on the far wall, “about ten minutes, actually. And they have nowhere to stay. So, unless I can find a vampire-friendly hotel within a couple of hours, they’re probably going to be staying here.”

Maria blinked.

“Yeah,” he said sourly. “A house-full of vampires. You can’t imagine the total lack of joy this fills me with.”

She watched him stomp up the stairs, still magnificently naked, and wondered why, if he hated vampires so much, he kept inviting them into his house.

The intercom buzzed five minutes after Ruarc got in, having spent the afternoon trawling the city for a vampire-friendly hotel. Since he couldn’t see himself getting a sincere answer to the question, “Do you cater for creatures of the night?” he’d ended up visiting them each in turn and asking to see their premier suites. Chloe had informed him that one of the visiting

vampires was a Master, and therefore not likely to be happy with a standard room.

Plus, he was bringing two minions with him. Ruarc didn't expect a standard bed would be big enough.

Tired, frustrated, and more than a little angry that the task had fallen to him when he'd really rather be in Faery, finding out why a goblin had tried to kill him, he slammed the door and shoved past Maria, who was flicking through a magazine and looking mutinous.

“Why don't you have a TV?”

“Because I can't work one.” He trudged up the stairs without looking at her. If he looked at her, he might either kill her or fuck her into the ground, and right now neither was preferable.

“What do you mean, you can't work one?” She sounded incredulous. “You press a button and it comes on. Press another button and it changes the station. Even I know that, and I was locked in a harem for seventy year --”

She broke off abruptly, and Ruarc stilled.

“You should have a TV,” she covered, lamely.

He turned.

“I meant seventy days,” she said, fingers tight on the magazine. “Months. Yes. Five years. Six. My English. Not so good.”

“Seventy years,” Ruarc said. He didn’t need to be a telepath to know that was what she’d meant.

“No! Months. English not my first language, *habla Espanola* ?”

“Yes, but we don’t need to since your English is perfect.”

“No, no, I lived in Mexico until I was ten --”

“Seventy years ago? Eighty?” He cocked his head. “How old are you, Maria?”

“Eighteen,” she said too quickly.

“Not human years. I meant --”

The intercom buzzed. Ruarc swore.

“Later,” he said, pointing a finger at Maria. “You will tell me later.”

“I don’t have to tell you anything.”

He saw her gaze dart to the windows. The sun was dipping in the sky. Dammit, as soon as it got dark she’d be gone, and then he’d never know. Seventy years? She couldn’t have been. Starne wasn’t more than forty years old, tops, and he’d owned the place.

Had someone else owned it before him?

The intercom buzzed again. Ruarc punched the button, still scowling. “Yes?”

There was a slight pause. “This is Jamie Greenwood, from Sundown in Rome.” He had an English accent and sounded tired. “I’m looking for Ruarc.”

“That’s me.” He sighed. “Come on up. Top floor.”

Maria watched him warily as he went into the kitchen, kicking the door as he did. Fucking vampires.

“I have nothing to offer them,” he called through to her. “Where d’you get blood from?”

“People.”

“Excellent.” He stuck his head back out. “I am not a buffet.”

She gave him a smile. It showed her fangs, but went nowhere near her eyes. “You’re not people, either.”

His scowl deepened. He poured water from the tap into a glass, eyeing his expensive coffee-maker balefully. Chloe had given it to him, but he had no idea how to use the thing. Why were people so obsessed with technology?

A knock sounded as he drained the glass. Showtime. He found a smile from somewhere, strode back through the apartment and paused. Maria had stood up, and now he could see what she was wearing -- or not wearing. One of his shirts, which covered her to about three inches below that hot pussy -- and nothing else.

Great. Now he had a hard-on. How professional.

He yanked the door open, smiling insincerely. “Hi. You must be...”

He trailed off. There were two men and a woman standing there, but he only sensed two vampires. A dark-skinned male. Vampire. Old. Powerful. A blonde female. Young. Fledgling. His gaze fixed on the third figure, a tanned young man.

“... human,” he finished.

“Where does it show?”

“Jamie,” the woman admonished.

“I’m sorry. I’m just tired,” he said to Ruarc. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to hail a cab when your companions are wearing bedsheets?”

“It’s not a bedsheet, it’s a burqa, and would you rather I fried to a crisp?”

“It’s not even all that sunny!”

“I’ll still fry!”

“Children,” said the male vampire, dark eyes flashing.

“Don’t you ‘children’ me,” the female snapped back. She had pink lips, pale skin, and shadows under her eyes. “I’m not your child.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Not that kind of child.” She rolled her eyes and held out her hand to Ruarc. “I’m sorry. I’ve been trapped in a tin can with these two for hour upon cranky hour. I’m Paige.”

Ruarc stared at her hand for a long moment before he realized he was being rude, and shook it. Her touch was cool.

“This is my boyfriend, Jamie, and my sire, Rafa. Rafael.”

Jamie, the young human, held out his hand for Ruarc to shake. Rafa did not.

“Ruarc of the Unseelie,” Ruarc said. “Come in.”

He stepped back, and after a second’s hesitation, they did. “I’m afraid I don’t have any... food in the house,” he said. “Maria might be able to help you with that.”

All eyes swiveled to Maria, who stood looking uncomfortable, tugging her shirt down over her thighs. She gave an unconvincing smile. “I can’t go outside,” she said. “Not yet.”

Jamie’s head tilted. “You’re a vampire,” he said.

“You’re in top form today,” Rafa rumbled. Then he froze, and sniffed the air.

Paige sniffed too. A grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. Maria looked like a deer trapped in headlights. “Oh my God,” Paige cried. “You’re sleeping with him!”

A blush stained Maria's cheeks. "Slept," she corrected hastily. "Once."

"You can *smell* that?" Ruarc said.

"Charming, isn't it?" Jamie made a face.

"Not only slept with him..." Rafa began, his dark gaze switching between Maria and Ruarc, then back again. Ruarc tensed.

"You are so not getting any tonight," Paige told Jamie, who scowled.

"What'd I do?"

"You have done nothing but complain since we left Rome! What else did they do?" Paige added to Rafa.

He grinned.

Maria swallowed.

"What's faery blood taste like?" Rafa asked, and Paige's hand flew to her mouth.

"No!"

“No way,” Jamie said, and they all stared at Maria, who backed up a step.

“How can they even tell?” Ruarc asked Jamie.

“It was only a little,” Maria said.

“Liar, it got you totally high.”

“It gets you high?” Paige looked delighted.

“They smell it or something,” Jamie told Ruarc. “Or maybe it’s ESP. They always know who’s been biting who.”

“How high?” Rafa wanted to know.

“Uh,” Maria’s gaze darted to Ruarc, who was starting to feel a little like the evening meal. “Not very.”

“Your pulse is racing,” Paige said. She turned to Rafa. “See, she still has a pulse. You said I didn’t need one.”

“It’s optional.” He didn’t look impressed with Maria. “Is that why you fucked him? Bloodlust?”

“Sure.” She lifted her chin, looking a little relieved.

“Oh, cheers,” Ruarc said.

“Why else would she fuck a faerie?” Rafa sneered.

“You’re not getting any either,” Paige informed him. She turned to Ruarc. “He’s just being cruel. I’d totally do you.”

“I’m standing right here!” Jamie protested.

“What do you mean, I’m not getting any?” Rafa looked furious.

“That was so rude! How do you not get that that was rude?”

“He’s *afaery*,” Rafa said, in the same tones one might say ‘child molester’.

“Wait, is she sleeping with both of you?” Ruarc asked Jamie, who nodded wearily.

“It’s a long story.”

“And you’re judging me for fucking a faery?” Maria said.

“Hey, I didn’t *make* you fuck me,” Ruarc said.

“This is like a soap opera,” said Paige, sitting down

and watching them like a spectator at a tennis match.

“Well, you *made* me take your blood, *maricón*,” Maria snapped.

“I hardly forced it on you! And what was I supposed to do, just sit there and let you bleed to death?”

“Yes,” Rafa said, as if it was obvious.

“You’re not getting any tomorrow, either,” Paige said. “What does *maricón* mean?”

“Give me some and I’ll tell you.”

“Why were you bleeding?” Jamie asked Maria.

“Goblin attack,” Ruarc said distractedly.

“Really?” Jamie looked fascinated. “What kind? Because I’ve never met one and I read their warrior caste has extra arms --”

“I can’t believe what a geek you’re being,” Paige said.

“It wasn’t a goblin who attacked me,” Maria said, “it was a faery.” She looked triumphant.

“What a surprise,” Rafa murmured, taking a seat next

to Paige, who scooted away, glaring at him.

“This faery?” Jamie asked, indicating Ruarc.

“No, but... what *were* you doing outside my club?” Maria asked him pointedly.

“Getting beaten up by a goblin,” Ruarc said.

“We should so have popcorn,” Paige said.

“It was a Seelie faery who attacked her,” Ruarc told Jamie, who seemed to be the only sane one left in the room.

“I thought you said it was a goblin.”

“No, he attacked me.”

“Aren’t goblins faeries?” Rafa asked.

“No. Yes. They’re Wildfae,” Ruarc said irritably.

“Why were you fighting it?” Jamie persisted. “Is there a war between the Wildfae and the Unseelie?”

“God, I hope not.”

“Or between the Seelie and the vampires?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“Seemed like it to me,” Maria muttered.

“Always does,” Rafa told her.

“Geez, you guys really do hate each other, don’t you?” Paige observed, at which point Rafa, Maria and Ruarc all glared at her.

“Yes,” they said in unison, probably the only time a faery had ever agreed with a pair of vampires. But a voice in Ruarc’s head added the rider: *You don’t hate Maria. You want to get her naked again .*

Dammit!

Silence fell for a long second. Paige covered her mouth with her hand, but her eyes were laughing.

“I have to go,” Ruarc said abruptly, weary beyond measure of anything with goddamned fangs.

“Where?” Maria asked, sharply.

“Away. I have to go and... be somewhere else.” He turned and headed for the door, desperate for fresh air and silence.

“Some host you are,” Maria said from behind him, and Ruarc stopped.

He turned.

He faced the three vampires and the human and said, “I’d tell you you’re all welcome in my home, but you all know faeries can’t lie. So, I’m just going to leave. Believe me when I say I’m glad you’re all in here...”

They looked confused.

“...so long as I’m not.” He made a bow and slammed out of the door.

Chapter Seven

Ruarc.

His name was Ruarc.

And he wanted her naked.

She'd heard his voice inside her head as clearly as if he'd said the words out loud. He could speak into her mind!

A cold feeling crept over her. *He could speak into her mind* . Could he see into her dreams? Could he get into her dreams?

Maria stood staring at the door in horrified silence for a moment, before she became aware of three sets of eyes burning holes in her back, and turned slowly.

Rafa slow-hand-clapped her.

“Oh, go to hell,” she snapped, and shoved past them to go up the stairs and scrub the smell of faery from her skin.

The smell of faery. It was obscene. How dare they go around smelling people like that! She sniffed at herself. She didn't smell of anything. She'd showered while Ruarc was out. She didn't smell! Maybe it was some psychic thing they could sense on her. Rafa had an air of power about him: maybe he'd read it from her or something.

But no -- it'd been Paige who realized it first. Who'd *scented* it!

She turned the shower on to scalding and ransacked the bathroom cupboard for anything that might make her smell different. All she came up with was a shampoo that smelled like Ruarc.

Dammit.

Half an hour later, her hair triple washed and her body scrubbed until it was raw, she emerged wrapped in a towel to find Paige sitting on Ruarc's bed, reading a magazine.

"I swear, these fashion specials get worse and worse. I mean, who looks good in pale green?"

She looked up, saw Maria wrapped in a towel that color, and rolled her eyes.

"Okay, you do. Green makes me look undead."

"Uh," said Maria. "You are undead."

"Yes, but I don't necessarily want to look it." Paige put down the magazine. "Jamie's gone to find someone to eat, if you're hungry. What with time differences and all, it's been daylight for far too damn long for me. I'm

only a fledgling.”

Maria clutched the towel around herself. “You seem close to Rafa,” she hedged.

“Hah, yes.” Paige absently figured an ugly scar on her neck. “Well, it’s complicated.”

“I seem to be hearing that a lot lately.”

“Yes, I’d imagine.” Paige watched Maria move around, opening the closets she’d explored earlier in search of a clean shirt, then said, “So, you’re sleeping with a faery.”

Maria nearly choked. “What the hell? I showered and everything!”

Paige laughed, looking blonde and beautiful as she did. “It’s written all over your face. Honey, I’m not judging you. Ruarc is gorgeous. And he seems a nice guy.”

He invaded my dream. My very intimate dream! “A -- wait, are you sure you’re a vampire? Aren’t we supposed to hate faeries?”

“I don’t know.” Paige eyed her keenly. “Are we?”

Maria felt heat flush through her. Truth was, she’d

never had it explained to her. Didn't even know she was supposed to be the Great Enemy of the Fae until Breslin had put her in a cage with one. Although she sure as hell wasn't particularly well disposed toward the faery that had snuck into her dream and fucked her brains out.

Although, when she thought of it like that, she wasn't entirely sure why.

She was saved from having to think of an answer by the intercom buzzing.

“Ooh.” Paige jumped up. “Lunch.”

Curious, and quite willing to distract herself from the horribly confusing thoughts she was having about Ruarc, Maria donned a shirt and followed her out to the mezzanine.

“I can't believe you can do this online,” Jamie said, looking up at them.

“She's probably a cop,” Rafa said, closing an expensive-looking laptop.

“Well, then, you can have the pleasure of doing a mind-wipe.”

Maria's eyes widened. How powerful was this guy?

Paige caught her eye. "He's a Master," she said. "There's lots he can do."

"So... if you can mind-wipe anyone, why do we need a hooker?" Jamie asked, throwing a stake up in the air and catching it backhanded. Maria watched it, transfixed, until his words sank in.

"You hired *a*hooker?"

Both men shrugged. Paige rolled her eyes again.

"Yeah, I know. But they're less likely to ask questions," she said, "they're more willing to go to a stranger's apartment, and they're not going to report any strange wounds."

"Plus, you can have sex with them afterwards," Rafa said, and Paige wagged her finger at him.

"Oh no, you don't. No sex with hookers. Geez, Rafa, she could have any kind of disease."

"Which we, as vampires, are immune to," he said, as if it was obvious. Maria, who hadn't actually known this, filed it away mentally for further use.

“But Jamie isn’t. Say you fuck her, and catch something disgusting, you could give it to Jamie. You can be a carrier without actually suffering from it.”

Rafa scowled at her.

“Plus, remember how you’re supposed to be not having sex with the people you bite?” Jamie reminded him, still throwing and catching the stake. “As an example to your beloved fledgling?”

Paige gave him a sunny smile.

“Well, someone better let me fuck them,” Rafa said moodily. His eyes roved over Maria, who tugged her shirt down nervously.

“No,” Paige said, descending the stairs as someone knocked on the door. “You’ve been mean enough to Maria. Don’t treat her like a whore.”

Maria, who in other circumstances would have been more than happy to get sweaty with the gorgeous vampire, gave a vigorous nod, and the corner of Rafa’s mouth turned up in amusement. He strode to the front door, opened it, and grabbed the girl standing there.

Maria had a glimpse of pale skin and lots of eyeliner before Rafa tipped her head to one side and sank his

fangs into her throat.

“So much for foreplay,” Paige sighed, pushing the door closed. “At least let the poor girl sit down.”

The ‘poor girl’ was clinging like a limpet to Rafa, making tiny moaning noises, and grinding her hips against him. Her short trashy skirt rode up, revealing a total lack of underwear.

“Class,” Jamie said.

“Hooker,” Paige reminded him. She grabbed Rafa’s head, yanked it away from the girl. “Rafa. Do not fuck her.”

He licked his lips, his eyes wild, but nodded unsteadily and pushed the girl toward Paige, who gave her a gentle hug and led her to the sofa.

“What’s your name, honey?”

The dazed girl licked her lips. “Aphrodesia.”

Rafa snorted. Jamie hid a laugh. Paige just asked patiently, “Your real name?”

“April.”

“April. Well, sweetheart, what did Jamie tell you when he hired you?”

“Jamie?” April seemed to focus properly for the first time. She looked around, saw Jamie leaning against the wall, stake tucked out of sight in the back of his jeans, and Maria standing on the stairs, then glanced back at Rafa and finally Paige. “What? I -- no. He didn’t say anything about a threesome.” She looked at Maria and Paige again. “A, er... fivesome. That’s extra.”

“Of course, sweetie,” Paige said soothingly. “Whatever you want. But it’s only me and Rafa.” She indicated him as he sat down on April’s other side, and April’s eyes glazed over again.

Jamie met Maria’s gaze and rolled his eyes. But as Paige brushed April’s matte black hair away from her neck and lowered her head, his attention snapped back in their direction.

Paige bit into the other side of April’s neck, as Rafa re-opened the wound he’d made earlier. April, pulled back against Rafa’s chest as Paige straddled her, was making the soft moaning noises again.

Maria, feeling voyeuristic, crossed the room to Jamie and said in a low voice, “Don’t you mind?”

He shrugged, but his shoulders were tense. “They have to feed. And since we don’t have any bagged blood available, it has to be a real person. Don’t worry,” he took the stake from his back pocket and twirled it, “I won’t let them take too much.”

“You’ll *stake* them?”

“Of course not. But it generally acts as a decent reminder.”

He sauntered over to the threesome on the sofa. Paige, Maria couldn’t help but notice, was rubbing her breasts over April’s, and her hand was stroking Rafa’s smooth scalp as he drank. As she watched the undeniably erotic tableau, her own temperature rose. Jamie, she saw, was starting to look uncomfortable in his jeans.

When Paige’s hand started creeping under April’s skirt, however, he pulled her away.

“No, sweetheart. No sex while you’re feeding.”

She looked up at him with dilated pupils, her lips swollen and red, her hands already tugging at his t-shirt. “But I’m not feeding now,” she purred, rubbing herself against him.

“No, you’re not. But Rafa is.”

Maria's attention duly switched to Rafa, who had April's skirt pushed up around her waist and his fingers delving into her pussy. Maria's own cunt clenched. Damn, but she wanted to join in. She had no desire to feed with Ruarc's potent blood still rushing through her veins, but with two hot men and the scent of sex in the air, she couldn't help being turned on.

Her mind drifted again, back to the harem, back five years to when she first saw the faeries together. Ruarc, another male and a female, brought out into the central garden where all the other inmates could see them. The three of them tall, pale and beautiful, licking and sucking and fucking each other for hours on end. She'd been so wet, just watching them, had hid at the back of her cell and touched herself, fingered her pussy and squeezed her breasts as the cries of the three faeries got louder and louder.

Now she was getting a repeat performance, as Rafa left the stunned April lying on the sofa and knelt down in front of the chair Jamie had appropriated. The human was sitting back with Paige in his lap, rising and falling on his cock. They were both still mostly dressed, Paige's skirt rucked up around her waist and Jamie's hands pulling off her top, working at her bra. Her back was to him, her fangs biting into her own lip.

Maria shifted, her pussy lips rubbing together, slick and hot. The soft fabric of Ruarc's shirt caught against her sensitized nipples.

As she watched, Rafa slipped Paige's thighs over his shoulders and bent to lick her pussy. Paige cried out, and Maria bit her own lip to keep from doing so. It looked good -- it looked so good -- and from the way Jamie was writhing beneath Paige, she could tell he was getting licked too.

Maria's pussy throbbed. She wanted to be touched so badly, but she couldn't do it to herself, not in public. Not with other people watching. Being on show. Being touched, bitten, fucked for someone else's enjoyment.

But this wasn't like being fucked in the harem. This was three people intent on giving each other pleasure.

When Paige came with a loud cry, her whole body convulsing under Jamie's gentle hands, Rafa stood up and fed his cock into her mouth. She leaned forward, grabbing his hips and sucking him right down as Jamie continued to thrust into her pussy. Above his harsh breathing Maria could hear the slick slap of flesh as the three of them writhed and bucked.

Her whole body was tight, desperate to be touched. Her nipples puckered against the shirt, the soft fabric

rubbing with a terrible friction. Every tiny movement of her hips sent spasms of pleasure through her whole body. Her teeth nipped her lower lip, sharp fangs that drew blood, heightened her awareness. The sense-memory of Ruarc's hands, his mouth on her, made her dizzy, so turned on she could hardly stand.

When Rafa came with a roar in Paige's mouth, then dropped to his knees to tongue her breasts while she rode Jamie, Maria couldn't stand it any longer. She raced back inside Ruarc's bedroom, locked the door and slid down to the floor, tearing at her shirt, squeezing her own nipples, easing the ache there. One hand dipped between her legs, parted her folds and found her throbbing clit.

She stroked herself twice, three times, and came, shuddering with relief.

Opening her eyes, still trembling, the first thing she saw was Ruarc's bed. The bed where she'd bitten him and he'd fucked her to an explosive orgasm.

Just like he had in her dream.

He'd *invaded* her dream. And she'd let him.

Maria's teeth clenched, her afterglow fading rapidly. From outside the bedroom, she heard the cries and

groans of the threesome on the sofa, but they weren't distracting her any more. Her mind went back to Ruarc, and how he'd licked and sucked her over and over until she'd begged --*begged!* -- him for more.

Smart, Maria, very smart.

Chapter Eight

“Who sent you?”

Already keyed up with anger, Ruarc spared the goblin nothing as he shoved it against the rough wall outside the club where he'd been attacked last night.

“Who,” he grabbed one of its arms and slammed it repeatedly against the wall, “sent you?”

The dagger fell from the creature's hand, slimy blood dripping from its skin. “Won't telllll you,” it hissed.

Ruarc pushed his face up close against the goblin's, stared right into its huge glassy black eyes, breathed in its foul stench. First Maria, then those bloody vampires from Rome, and then halfway through his cursory examination of the jazz club he'd been attacked by another slimy, putrid goblin.

"You will tell me," he said through clenched teeth, "or I will rip off your appendages one by one. Starting," he shoved his knee between the creature's bowed legs, "here."

The goblin's eyes widened in horror, but it still shook its head.

"You were sent to kill me?" Ruarc asked, contemplating pushing his thumbs into the creature's eyes. It nodded, trembling. "On whose orders?"

I'd like to say mine, but in truth I'd rather kill you myself.

The voice in his head wiped out any response the goblin might have made. Because it was Maria's voice. And if she'd heard what he'd just said out loud, she had to be close. He hadn't even realized how dark it had become.

Where are you?

Right behind you.

Before he could move, could even breathe, something hit him hard and sharp between the shoulderblades. Smashing into the goblin, he slithered down to the ground, momentarily winded.

“How dare you,” Maria’s voice was tight, “how goddamned *dare* you invade my dream?”

Oh. Fuck.

She stood over him, wearing nothing but his shirt, her legs long and bare and gleaming in the low light from a streetlamp. The orange light lent her mussed hair a hellish glow, compounded by the flash of her eyes and the snarl revealing her fangs.

In her hand was a bent iron crowbar.

“Uh,” Ruarc’s eyes fixed on the corroded metal, “can we talk about this later?”

“No.” Grabbing the goblin as it attempted to sidle away, she smashed it back against the wall with a wet smacking sound. Gone was the terrified woman who’d been held back with a crucifix last night -- here was a vampire hepped up on faery blood and fury.

“Won’t hurrrt youu,” the goblin pleaded, obsidian eyes huge. “Onllly waaant Unssseelie.”

Her eyes narrowed and she shoved the iron bar across the goblin’s throat. Ruarc winced, gaining his feet and standing well back. He really didn’t want to give Maria any reason to use that iron bar on him.

“Then you tell me,” Maria snarled -- and a vampire with her fangs out could really snarl -- “who came here last night and attacked us?”

The goblin’s eyes darted around helplessly.

“Move the bar,” Ruarc said. “It can’t speak.”

Grudgingly, she did so.

“Won’t telllll youuu,” the goblin hissed, and she snarled and stepped back, planting a foot against its chest and ripping off one of its arms as if it was a paper doll.

Ruarc stared. *You ripped its arm off.*

Yes, and I’ll do the same to you if you don’t shut the fuck up and stay out of my goddamned head.

“Now,” Maria held the stunned goblin back with its own severed limb, her nose wrinkling at the stench of blood pouring from its arm socket, “another one of you slimy little bastards was here last night and he had a friend. A Seelie faery. What did they want?”

The goblin looked wretched. “Kiiill the Unsssseelie,” it whimpered.

“This Unseelie?” Maria indicated Ruarc. “Yeah. Well, maybe I’ll help you with that.”

“Who sent you?” Ruarc asked, before she killed it and he lost his chance.

The goblin shook his head. He sighed, pulled off his shirt and wrapped it around his hand to pick up the crowbar Maria had dropped.

“Tell me, or I’ll shove this where your arm used to be.”

The goblin squealed. “Unsssseelie High Court! Hire Gresshk to kill mind-speaker faery after Skalar failed!”

“Skalar was yesterday’s goblin?” Maria said, and Greshk nodded. She glanced at Ruarc. “So your High Court wants you dead. Whose brains did you pick there?”

“No one’s,” Ruarc said, frowning. “That is, no one in the High Court. The Queen asked me to...”

He trailed off. He’d read those humans for her, just like she asked. Only then he went and advised them afterwards. Advised them against the Queen’s wishes.

“Did the Queen hire you?” he demanded. “Did she get someone to hire you?”

“What is this, Twenty Questions?” Maria grumbled. “I didn’t come down here to get myself all slimy so you could interrogate this disgusting creature.”

“Maria, please,” he said. “I have to know who’s trying to kill me.”

“If you don’t shut up, it’ll be me,” she said.

“Wasss not the Queen,” Greshk hissed. “Ssshe don’t talk to goblinsss. Wasss herrr boy toy.”

Ruarc blinked. The muscular fae who’d been pleasuring the Queen while she made her demands of Ruarc?

“On her order?” he asked.

For fuck's sake, he said it wasn't her, Maria snapped in his head.

Yes, but she could have ordered him to do it. Plausible deniability. Remember we can't lie, Ruarc told her bitterly. If he was found out, she wouldn't miss him. There's plenty to take his place .

But none to take yours, Maria said shrewdly.

The Queen wouldn't have me killed, he said, a little uncertainly. She saved my life after we escaped from Starne's. Why would she do that, then kill me over something so trivial?

Saved your life? Maria scoffed. Yes, but she left you in there for five years, flyboy. Sounds like she really loves you.

The goblin was watching them, shaking and whimpering. "Pleasse," it hissed, "I go now?"

Maria relented a little. "Not yet," she said. "You're my bitch now. You go back to whatever disgusting slimy hell dimension you came from, and you go find out who really wants this faery dead. Then you come back and you tell me. And if you do it right," she waved his severed arm at him, "I'll let you have this back."

Greshk's huge eyes widened a little more, then he nodded and abruptly vanished.

Maria turned, and Ruarc was about to thank her for sending the goblin to find out who wanted him dead when he caught the look in her eyes.

“Don't you dare think I'm doing this for your benefit, *maricón*,” she snapped, grabbing the iron bar from him. He didn't let go.

“Then why are you doing it?”

“Because, *baboso*, whoever hired him also hired the Seeliemaricón who tried to rape me last night. And when I find out who that asshole was, I'm gonna tear his arms off and stuff them down his throat.” She tugged on the crowbar.

“He probably didn't hire the Seelie, and if he did it was just for a distraction,” Ruarc said, and immediately realized it was the wrong thing to say.

“Oh, sure, to you it's a distraction. Well, I happen to take that kind of thing pretty seriously. I don't know about you, but I didn't exactly enjoy my time in Breslin's zoo, and --”

Ruarc yanked on the crowbar. “Breslin? The guy who

owned it was called Starne.”

She scoffed. “Yeah, sure, he was when you got there. How old do you think he was? He was just the latest buyer.”

Rage boiled through him. A man who bought people. Who stole them. Who’d snared Ruarc in the middle of sex with two friends and stuck him in a cell for five years, rented him out to rich customers who liked the idea of sex with a bona fide faery.

His fingers clenched around the iron bar, its power sizzling through the fabric wrapped around his hand.

“You think I’m lying!” Maria looked furious.

“No, I don’t.” Remembering her dream, the way she’d been turned -- no. She hadn’t been lying. “Who was he? The vampire who bit you?”

New anger flashed in her eyes. “Some*cabrón* who turned me to save his own skin. Breslin had him but he made a bargain.” Her lips twisted, baring her fangs. “His own freedom in return for a virgin fledgling.”

Horror stabbed at Ruarc. “You were a virgin when they put you in there?” Christ in a miniskirt, no wonder she’d reacted so badly to him.

Maria gave a mirthless smile. “Not for long. You see, faery, I didn’t have the luxury of playmates like you did. I had no one to fuck around with for fun. I had chains, and holy water, and guards standing over me, and fat men laughing while they fucked me. I had pain, and humiliation.”

“It wasn’t a picnic for any of us,” Ruarc murmured, thinking of the iron cage he’d been kept in. Remembering the bite of the iron shards as Chloe had destroyed the zoo with her voice.

“Oh, sure. I saw you happily fucking all day. And for some variety, they put you with the elf, or with the siren. I wasn’t allowed out with anyone but a client.”

Ruarc tilted his head. “Why was that? They didn’t want you drinking supernatural blood?”

Her lip curled back. “Hah, I doubt they knew.” She advanced on him, tugging him closer by the iron bar. “You want to know why I wasn’t allowed out with any of the other *exhibits* ? Because I killed one of them, that’s why.”

“You killed one? Who?”

She bared her fangs at him. “Before your time, flyboy.

He was a faerie. And he thought he was better than me. That's all you need to know."

The hell it is.

He knew she'd heard him by the fury in her eyes. She shoved the crowbar at him and he tensed away from it, missing by a hairsbreadth.

"You killed him because he was a faery?"

She visibly prickled. "He would have killed me for being a vampire."

"You don't know that --"

"I do know that!" Her voice rose to a shout. "You're the one who likes to dick around in people's memories, *maricón*. You tell me if it's the truth or not."

Ruarc's jaw tightened. "I don't dick around in people's memories. Coming into your dream was an accident."

"You are so full of shit --"

"I'm *afaery*," he gritted. "We can't lie."

"Yeah, you keep telling me that, but you know what? I don't believe you. What were you doing in my dream?"

“I drifted there by accident. I’m -- I’m --” *sorry* , he wanted to say, but he couldn’t, because he wasn’t. How could he be sorry he’d experienced that?

Her eyes glinted. She feinted with the iron bar and barely missed his bare stomach. “What?” she demanded. “A liar? A cheat? A low-down, no-good *cabrón* who thinks he’s better than a stupid vampire?”

“I don’t think you’re stupid.”

“See, you’re lying ag --”

“I don’t think you’re stupid,” Ruarc yelled. “I think you’re insecure and crazy and desperate and proud and so angry you’re vibrating with it --”

“You think I’m crazy?”

Sure, that was the one to pick on.

“Yes. I think you’re a bloody nutcase, and you know what? I must be even more of a bloody nutcase, because I actually like you for it.”

“Oh, now I know you’re talking shit --”

Exasperated, Ruarc grabbed her by the jaw and kissed

her, catching her off-guard until she jabbed him with the iron bar and the sudden, burning pain sent him leaping back, yelping.

“Jesus~~Christ~~ , woman, do you have any idea --”
Breathless, he cupped the wound, felt it sizzle and blister deep into his flesh. Tears burned his eyes. Nothing in the world hurt worse than iron, nothing. Stumbling, he fell back against a pile of pallets, smashing through them. Shards of wood dug into his skin but he barely noticed. The pain of the iron bar, the deep jagged wound in his stomach, obliterated all other sensations.

“Don’t you dare ever do that to me,” Maria snapped, but she had the grace to look a little concerned.

“Duly noted,” Ruarc gasped, trying to brace himself against the pain enough to gain his feet. Blood churned between his fingers.

“You don’t get to treat me like that,” she said. “No one does.”

He nodded, his head swimming. “Next time I’ll ask.”

“Next time?” she snarled, but she tucked the crowbar under her arm and came over to help him up. “What makes you think you get a next time with me, *maricón*

?”

Her grip was powerful, and when she hauled him to his feet he stumbled against her, narrowly missing the crowbar again.

“I meant --” he was having trouble breathing “ -- next time I want... want to kiss y...”

She shot him a suspicious look. Pain so strong it made him nauseous washed through Ruarc, steeling his last breath.

Maria...

She stiffened. “I told you, stay out of my head.”

He couldn’t stand any more. She was entirely holding him up. *I need to...I’m going... I have to...*

go--

Maria would have screamed, if she hadn’t been too terrified.

In the space between breaths, she went from the alley behind the club to an endlessly huge marble hall,

cloaked in freezing mist and numbing silence. Ruarc, still in her arms, faltered and fell, taking her down with him, thudding heavily on the achingly cold marble floor.

The mist rolled over them. The silence pressed down. Maria didn't want to break it.

What the hell, faery?

His eyes fluttered. His skin was translucent. *Ruarc* , he said into her mind. *My name is Ruarc* .

His voice was weak. He was dying.

Hastily, Maria checked for the crowbar -- was it touching him? No. Well, at least she wasn't making it worse. But how the hell did she make it better?

Where are we?

Faery. Need... help...

The faery realm. Oh, Jesus and all his saints.

What do I do? she asked him, her heart pounding, scrambling back so her weight wasn't on him.

I... the Queen. Call... she can heal...

The Faery Queen? Maria shook her head, appalled. She'd heard stories. Who hadn't? You didn't mess with the Faery Queen. *I'm a vampire. She'll kill me!*

Ruarc gave her a faint smile. *Well, then*, he said, and closed his eyes.

What? Maria shook him. *Well, then, what? Ruarc, what?*

Nothing. His chest rose and fell. And then it didn't rise again.

Panicked now, Maria tried calling out with her mind. *Faery Queen! I -- we need help!*

Nothing. Ruarc lay still. Angry -- because one reflex she'd learned over the last seventy years was to turn fear into anger -- Maria clutched at Ruarc's cool shoulders, shook his heavy body. A dead weight.

No.

Gripping the iron bar in both hands, she took in a deep, deep breath, then opened her lungs and bellowed, "Oi! Faery Queen!"

For a second, nothing happened. Maria clutched Ruarc'

s hand and felt tears rise behind her eyes. He was dead. She'd killed him.

“Do not,” came an icy voice from behind her, “call me in such a manner.”

Almost afraid of what she'd see, Maria looked up.

The woman standing there was so beautiful it hurt to look at her. Her hair was like frost, her skin blue-white. In her eyes were depths of cold so chilling Maria shivered. She was carrying a bundle of cloth that Maria realized in horror was a human baby. Against all the odds, it seemed perfectly warm and healthy.

“Vampire,” the Queen added contemptuously, and all of a sudden several dozen terrifyingly huge faeries surrounded her.

The crowbar didn't feel like such a fantastic weapon any more.

She was surrounded by tall, ethereal people, all incredibly beautiful but all somehow looking like they ought to be wearing toe-tags. Ruarc didn't usually look like that. Sure, he was a gringo supreme with skin that seemed to have never seen the sun, but he didn't look this... dead.

Usually.

“He needs help,” she said, gesturing to Ruarc’s still body, hoping she’d been wrong and he wasn’t actually dead yet. It was so damned cold here anyone’d feel like a corpse.

The Queen glanced at Ruarc with disinterest. “He is low-court,” she said dismissively, “and he has displeased me.” Her eyes narrowed. “As have you. How dare you enter our realm!”

“I didn’t do it on purpose, okay? He brought me here. He’s hurt and he needs help. He said you could heal him.”

A muscular young man wearing little more than a loincloth -- yet somehow displaying no signs of feeling the cold -- turned to the Queen.

“My lady,” he said, and there was a whine in his voice. “We cannot believe her! She is *avampire* .”

“A vampire who can hear you,” Maria muttered.

The Queen looked bored. “Kill her.”

Maria’s hands tightened around the crowbar and her body automatically curled over Ruarc’s. “I’ll bargain,”

she said quickly, and felt a brush against her mind as she did.

No, Ruarc said. Don't... bargain...

Relief flooded through her. He was alive! Dammit, he was alive and she was about to get killed.

Would you rather I died? I'm trying to save your life here, maricón. A little gratitude would be nice .

She thought she felt him smile, which was incredibly weird.

“What could you possibly have,” the Queen said in tones that could have given an entire continent hypothermia, “that I could ever want?”

A faint smile rippled through the assembled fae.

Smug bastards, Maria thought.

Especially... boy toy...

Yes, well, probably. Her gaze went to the especially handsome young man standing very close to the Queen, wearing a self-satisfied expression that made Maria want to swing her crowbar at his groin.

Boy toy...

“No! Wait!” She pointed with the crowbar, and was gratified when they all stepped back. “He’s the one who sent assassins after Ruarc! He sent two goblins and a Seelie.”

They all froze, quite a feat for such a chilly group. The young fae gave a nervous laugh.

The Queen didn’t look amused.

“We caught one of them about fifteen minutes ago. He was called... Greshk. And he only has three arms,” Maria added.

“My lady,” the young fae spluttered. “We can’t believe a vampire! They lie!”

Not... this... one...

From the way every single faery turned to stare at Ruarc, Maria guessed that thought had been intended for more than just her.

“Mind-speaker?” The Queen handed the baby to an attendant fae and fell gracefully to her knees, careful not to touch Maria. “What do you know of this?”

Truth, came Ruarc's voice, very faint and weak.

"He's dying," Maria said urgently, grasping Ruarc's cold hand in her own, remembering the cool, rich drops of blood he'd given her when she'd needed it.

The Queen was silent for a moment, radiating a coldness so intense Maria felt her fangs start to chatter. Then she said, without looking up, "Restrain him," and two of the largest fae grabbed the struggling boy toy.

The Queen laid her hands on Ruarc's chest, moved one down to cover the horrible wound on his stomach. Deep, blistered, it looked as if the iron had started eating through his flesh the second Maria stuck it in him.

She cringed. *Ruarc, I'm so sorry* .

Again, that faint smile in her mind.

The Queen closed her eyes, and Maria waited. Waited for a glow, or a pulse of energy, or... something. But nothing happened. The Queen removed her hands, and rose bonelessly to her feet.

The wound was healed.

"Mind-speaker," she said imperiously, and Ruarc's

eyes snapped open.

“My Queen,” he said. In a movement so fast Maria could hardly see it, he was on one knee, bowing his head to the Queen.

“Do not displease me further,” she told him dispassionately.

“It doesn’t please me at all, my lady, believe me,” he said, looking up at her. “But the goblin Greshk told us he’d been hired by your... consort to kill me.”

“I did it for you!” the boy toy shouted. “He robbed you of that human child!”

The Queen looked up at the baby one of her flunkies was carrying.

“My lady, I did not rob you of anything,” Ruarc said carefully. “I gave the human parents honest advice. They bargained.”

The Queen was silent for a long moment. Maria remained utterly still, not even sure she could mind-speak to Ruarc without someone overhearing.

“I have many consorts,” the Queen said eventually. “I have only one mind-speaker. Have a care,” she said to

Ruarc, “you do not become captured or injured again when I may have need of you.”

With that, she took back the baby and swept away, her entourage following behind. The cries and pleas of the boy toy faded into the mist.

Ruarc looked down at Maria, and winked.

Chapter Nine

It took a second to find her voice.

“Okay,” she croaked, painfully aware she was only wearing a thin shirt and the air was glacial, “what the hell just happened?”

Ruarc grinned, holding out a hand and pulling her to her feet. He was no longer freezing cold -- in fact, he looked and felt disgustingly healthy.

“In a nutshell? We’re safe. And I’m fine.” He inclined his head. “Thank you.”

Maria shrugged, aware she still held the crowbar that had nearly killed him. “Just returning the favor,” she said, unable to meet his eyes. Her gaze dropped to the pink, healing wound on his stomach. “Yo, what the hell happened with this deathly wound you had? Were you faking that?”

“No. Stick a crowbar in anyone’s stomach and it’ll kill them -- with a faery, it just makes it much quicker. And much, much more painful.” He took her wrist, lifted it to his mouth and brushed a gentle kiss over the healing marks left by the Seelie’s crucifix. “Fae royalty can cure pretty much anything.”

“The touch of a king, huh?”

“Absolutely.”

“And,” breathless, because he was still holding her wrist, his thumb stroking the delicate skin, “are you really her only mind-speaker? Can’t any of the other faeries do it?”

“None in her court. There might be some Wildfae who can do it. I know there are a couple of Seelie. But you know what?”

Maria licked her lips. “What?”

“I really don’t care about them. Maria?”

Her breath hitched as his thumb stroked her palm.
“Yes?”

“Can I kiss you now?”

She wanted to pretend to think about it. She wanted to make him wait. But unfortunately, her body had other ideas because it blurted, “Hell, yes!” and threw itself at him.

Ruarc laughed, caught her, and bit her lower lip gently. But Maria didn’t want gentle. He’d nearly died, and she had to feel how alive he was now. Smooshing her nearly-naked body up against his, she kissed him hard, commandeering his mouth and bossing it around with her own.

“I want you to know,” she gasped, breaking away for a second, “that I only saved your life because you saved mine.”

Ruarc nuzzled her jaw, his rough stubble delicious against her skin. “Sure,” he agreed.

“And now we’re even, right, faery?”

“Mmm,” he said, his voice a low vibration that sent a pulse of arousal through her. “Well, not quite. I mean, you did nearly kill me.”

“Hello, you nearly got me killed yesterday! I was just getting payback.”

His hands skimmed up her thighs, over her hips. Cupped her bare ass. Stroked her. “Well, maybe we’re even,” he said. He licked at the healing scar on her chest where the crucifix had burned her and she shivered. “Cold?”

Turned on, actually -- but yes, in truth she was still cold. She nodded.

“Then I’d better warm you up.” He kissed her, long and deep, the sort of drugging kisses she’d dreamed about as a teenager and dismissed as imaginary when the reality failed to live up to her imagination.

But Ruarc... Ruarc kissed like he was made for it. His tongue stroked into her mouth, darting under her fangs, licking at her playfully. Maria wrapped her arms around him, suspending everything else and just reveling in the pleasure of kissing him. Only her thin shirt separated her chest from his, kept her breasts from rubbing all

over his delicious hard pecs and tight nipples.

In fact...

Ruarc frowned, confused, as she pulled away, but smiled as she started tugging buttons open. He slipped his hands inside her open shirt, sliding them over her waist, her hips, cupping her ass again. Pulling her against him. This time, her bare breasts flattened themselves against his chest, and her nipples puckered to aching points. Ruarc slid one hand up her body, his fingers caressing lightly as they went, over her ribs, the side of her breast, her collarbone, her neck, and he cupped her head as he kissed her, more wonderful drugging kisses.

But drugging kisses weren't enough. Maria wanted more, a lot more.

I'm so glad you're alive.

His lips traced a damp trail down her neck, his hand following. His thumb brushed her nipple.

Likewise, he murmured in her head. The soft caress of his fingers was almost more than she could bear, but then his tongue found the pulse in her throat and his teeth nipped her gently.

Ruarc? Promise me -- can faeries break promises?

No. It's the same as lying.

Then promise me you won't fuck around in my head ever again. Some things she wasn't totally ready to open up to anyone.

His fingers made circles around her nipples. His other hand kneaded the soft flesh of her buttocks.

I won't fuck around in your head, he promised, unless you invite me. And drifting in during dreams doesn't count .

She swallowed, remembering how that particular dream had panned out. *If you drift in and I don't want you there...*

I'll go. Just tell me. He raised his head, and his eyes were fierce. *I don't read minds without permission, Maria. I never have, and I never will. I can't help seeing the shape of your thoughts but I will never invade them. You understand?*

She cupped his face, felt the roughness of his shadowed jaw, and realized she understood a little more than that.

Yes, she told him. I understand .

He kissed her again, fiercely, taking control this time. Shoving his shirt off her, he molded her body against his, flattening her breasts against his chest, jerking her hips into his. Beneath the torn and bloody khakis he wore she felt the press of his erection and rubbed herself against it.

Ruarc groaned, but Maria figured he couldn't be having as good a time of it as she was. Completely naked, she tilted her hips and opened her legs, wrapping one around his waist.

He was pretty hard, his cock standing up and pushing against her through his clothes. She could feel the heat and the strength of it and as she angled herself against him, she felt it throb against her pussy.

Christ, Maria!

She smiled against his mouth, nipped his lip without drawing blood, and rocked her hips against his. The friction was incredible, rough fabric against sensitive flesh. Clinging to him, her arms wrapped so tight around his shoulders there wasn't a gap between them, she slid her other leg up and down his.

She was wet now, and as she rubbed her pussy against

the hard bulge of Ruarc's cock she felt the heat building inside her. Her clit was pressed against the coarse khaki, and if she just angled herself --

Tightening her grip on his shoulders, she swung her other leg up, locked her ankles together behind his back and rubbed her calf against his naked waist.

You're killing me, Ruarc moaned inside her head, his mouth on her neck again.

That makes twice in one day, she told him, grinding her hips against his. *I could come like this*, she added in a mental whisper, and he groaned out loud, biting into her neck.

Damn, she wanted to bite him. Wanted to taste that sweet, cool faery blood, feel it slide down her throat. Her hips rocked faster as she thought of it, riding him hard, feeling his cock swell and throb through his clothes. The rough friction of the wet fabric, slick with her own moisture, was driving her mad. He'd hardly even touched her -- hadn't put any part of his body between her legs without clothing in the way -- and yet she was about to come.

And I haven't even bitten you yet, she thought breathlessly as she shook and trembled against him.

Ruarc shoved her back against a pillar, thrusting his hips against hers, mimicking sex, stroking her clit with his cock through his clothes. The carved marble was rough and cold, so very cold, against her back, but the contrast only spurred her on.

You can bite me any time you like, came his voice in her head, and she broke, her fangs tearing into his neck, her orgasm hitting as her tongue touched his blood.

So intense was the pleasure that she almost missed the sound of his zipper opening, but she didn't miss it when his bare cock took the place of the rough fabric abrading her folds. Dragging one hand down his body, she grasped the hard, thick length of him and guided it inside her, her head falling back as he filled her.

He fucked her hard, pounding into her as she pulled on his blood, and it was only the memory that he'd recently been so close to death that made her stop, swallowing the last mouthful with heady pleasure.

Why'd you stop? Ruarc asked, his hand slipping between them to fondle her clit.

Didn't want-- she closed her eyes as new waves of pleasure crashed over her *--to weaken you. You did nearly die pretty recently* .

Do I look like I'm weak to you? Ruarc growled, and she opened her eyes to see his eyes glowing an unearthly blue. *The Queen totally dosed me .*

Even as he spoke, the pillar behind Maria gave a creak.

I think we're too much for it, she told him, and unwrapped her legs to kick off from the unsteady marble column, knocking Ruarc off-balance and sending him crashing to the floor.

It ought to have hurt when she crashed down on top of him, but with his sparkling faery blood rushing through her veins and the force of the fall shoving his cock deeper inside her, she didn't notice at all.

Astride him now, she arched her back, taking him as deep as she could, smoothing her hands over his chest. The wound on his stomach was almost completely healed now, just a fading pink mark she stroked gently.

Ruarc's hands were on her hips, his fingers digging into her flesh as he pulled her harder into each thrust. Now that her body was no longer shielded by his, the cold air made her skin tingle, her breath clouding in the air.

It's so cold here!

Ruarc gave a devilish grin and in one swift movement

had her on her back on the cold floor. *Then I'll warm you up .*

He tilted her hips and drove into her, and the shock of it had her foot kicking out against the marble pillar, which shuddered and groaned. When he lifted her hips clear off the ground and rose up on his knees, impaling her, she gave a low moan and heard a loud crack from above. Dust showered them both.

I think we're breaking it, she told him.

I don't care.

Your Queen might, she said, and he groaned and said, *Hold on .*

And then again, in between breaths, he'd moved them from Faery back to his apartment, hitting the edge of the bed and falling to the floor with a thump that had him rolling away from her.

“No,” she cried, empty, but Ruarc was on his feet in seconds and pulling her up with him. Eagerly, she rubbed against him, stripping off the rest of his clothes, but before she could push him back on the bed and take him inside her, he turned her around and pressed his gloriously naked body against hers.

Maria...

His chest was hard and strong against her back. His fingers caressed her breasts, pulling at her nipples. Between her legs his cock jutted, rubbing the sopping wet folds of her pussy.

I have this fantasy, he told her, licking and nibbling the back of her neck, about sliding into you from behind and feeling that soft round ass of yours against me when I'm inside you .

Maria's pussy clenched. He thrust gently against her, his tongue doing wicked things to her neck.

You do not have fantasies about me, she said, trying to sound disapproving and failing completely.

Are you kidding? I spent half of yesterday so hard it was painful. I want you every way there is, Maria. I want to suck and lick you all over. I want to fuck you from behind like an animal. I want to take you in the shower under the running water. I want to see my cock in your mouth. I want to bury my head between your legs and lick you until you can't remember your own name.

Waves of lust so strong she could barely see through them washed over Maria. Her knees buckled and Ruarc

held her upright, his hands leaving her breasts to grip her shoulders. There was uncertainty in his touch.

“I’m sorry,” he said out loud. “I went too far --”

No. She spun in his arms, pushed him back on the bed and knelt to take his thick cock in her mouth. *Not far enough .*

* * *

It was only later, after Ruarc had made good on his promise to lick her until she forgot her own name, then pressed her up against the double-height window overlooking the city and fucked her so hard the glass broke and they went plummeting through the night sky, that Ruarc’s wings shot out from his back and Maria remembered she was having blissful, multi-orgasmic sex with a faery.

Too exhilarated to care, she let him fly her back inside the apartment and lay her down on his bed, where she sprawled, utterly exhausted.

“You can fly,” she said, her voice husky, regarding the iridescent blue and green wings dominating the room.

“Yep.” He shook them, sending clouds of glittering dust to the ground. “Most faeries can.”

She stared for a while, watching him shrug his wings away. This hadn't been about blood. It hadn't been in a dream. It had been real, gloriously, wonderfully real, and she'd wanted every second of it.

"You're a faery," she murmured.

"You're a vampire." He stood there watching her, his face impassive.

"Why are we supposed to hate each other?" Maria asked.

Ruarc's shoulders lifted, doing interesting things to his chest muscles. "I have no idea. Do you hate me?"

Carefully, she shook her head.

"I'm very glad to hear it. I don't hate you either." He sat beside her on the bed, took her hand in his. "Reckon there might be a place for a vampire and faery together?"

Okay, she'd been in a harem for seventy years, but even she knew this song. "Somehow," she teased. "Someday, somewhere."

Epilogue

She found him in a basement apartment with stains on the carpet and light fittings that rattled every time the subway went by. In his lap was a girl with track-marks scarring both arms and vampire bites swelling her white neck.

She looked about eighteen. Evidently his tastes hadn't changed much in seventy years.

Maria narrowed her eyes.

“Hey,*gringo* ,” she called, and his head snapped up.

“Who the hell are you?”

“I am someone,” she hefted her stake, “who will not do nicely.”

Cat Marsters

Cat lives in a village in south east England, which, while not quite a fairytale setting, is nonetheless very pretty and was mentioned in the Domesday Book of AD 1087. She shares a house with only slightly batty parents who hardly ever tell her to get a real job, and a musician brother who knows there's no chance she'll ever get one if he doesn't. Cat doesn't have children but she does have cats, who are her babies in every sense except the biological one.

Cat has been writing all her life, but in order to keep herself rich in shoes and chocolate, she's also worked as an airline check-in agent, video rental clerk, stationery shop assistant, and laboratory technician. She's aiming for a fairytale cottage, and asks all potential Prince Charmings to apply in writing with pictures of themselves and their Aston Martins.

Visit's Cat's web site at <http://www.catmarsters.com>.

