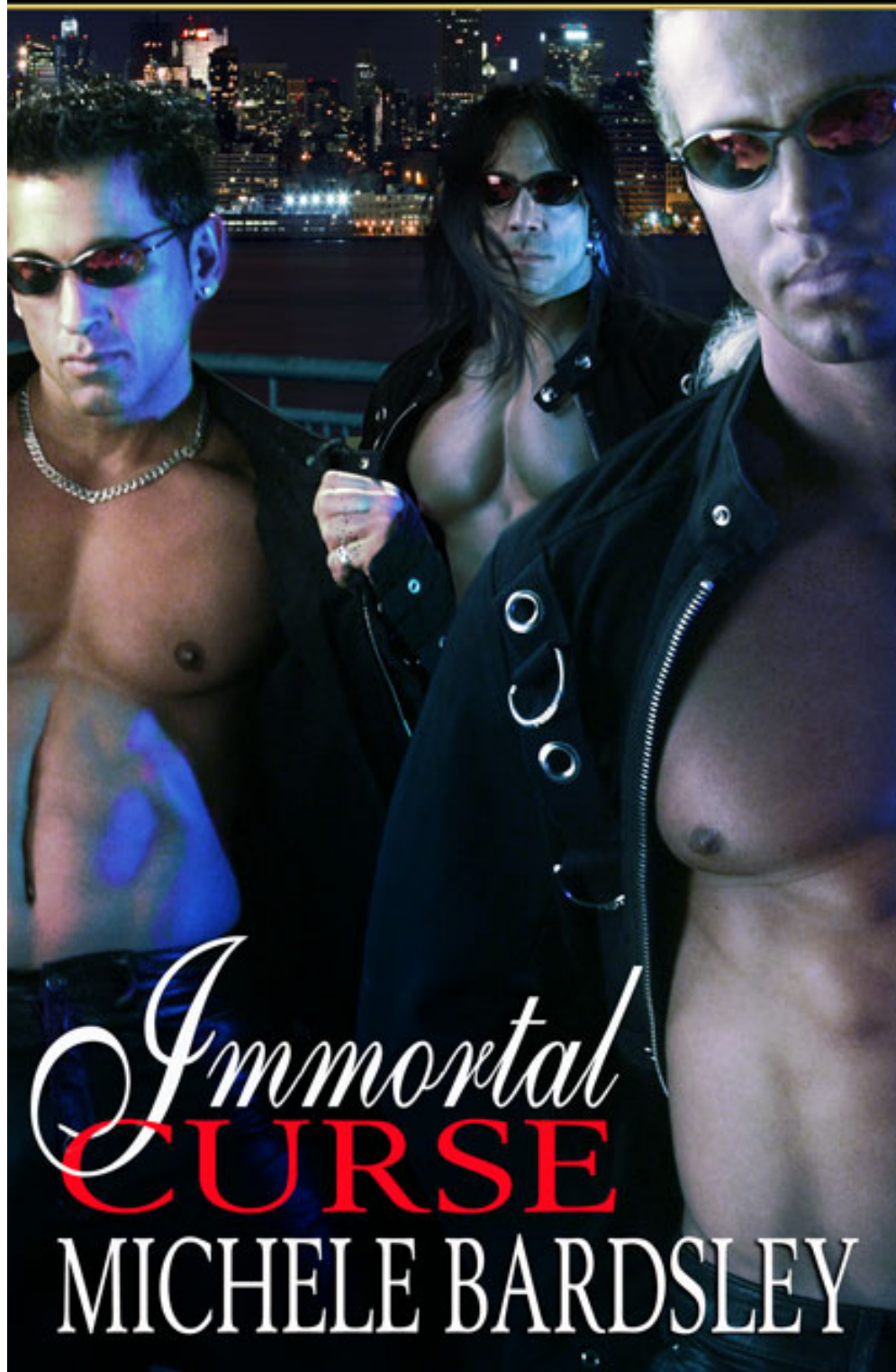


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Immortal Curse

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IMMORTAL CURSE

Michele Bardsley

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Prologue

*A Thousand Years Ago
An Unknown Continent*

"All shall you pay," intoned the old witch as she surveyed the three men crowded into her cave. They bore the bodies of her daughter and granddaughter. Their crude armor, bloodstained from battle, could not protect them from the wrath of the powerful crone.

They had known the price when they took the corpses of Aliea and her babe from the burning house, yet willingly made the journey to certain death.

Alrek had loved his wife and his just-born daughter. To see them not only forever still, but also burned and smoked-stained slashed open his heart and stole the compassion from his soul.

"Jantra, forgive us."

"I warned you, Alrek. If I allowed you to take her to wife, you would protect her and our village."

"I love Aliea. And I love my daughter." His voice broke on the words and he buried his face in his hands.

She turned to the others. "What of Delicia?"

"Gone, my lady."

"Dead?"

"We do not know."

Her sigh rattled her frail form. It sounded like sticks clicking against each other. "Úlfr and Thórr...you failed me, too?"

"We all failed you, Jantra," murmured Thórr. "We do not know who attacked the village. We do not know who took their lives." His gaze swept the bodies now wrapped in the scented cloths used only for the dead.

"Compassion I have. Love for you all." Jantra grasped her warding stick with one aged hand then pointed crooked fingers at the downtrodden men. "Aliea and Delicia are the last of their kind. The last of my kind. With their deaths, we are no more. My daughters..." Her milky blue gaze sought Alrek's. "Only one way exists now to ensure our survival."

"No!" Alrek's heart beat in dread. "We shared our blood and our beds with Aliea and Delicia. We did all that you asked and more."

"Aliea chose you as her only provider. She broke with tradition and this I allowed. Love, she feels. I cannot deny her..." Jantra's lips thinned. "We gave you good health and plentiful crops. We taught you our magic. We bartered, Alrek, when you arrived on this land and sought it for your own. You all agreed to the price asked."

"We are not Blood Takers. We are not the same as you and your daughters. How can you ask—"

She shook a bony finger. "Will you deny me, Alrek?"

Their lives in this land had been simple but happy. The men had willing, insatiable women—beautiful, voluptuous twins—for bed partners, full bellies, and with the birth of his daughter, hopes for children. They worked hard and all wanted peaceful lives. When the invaders came, they were not prepared. The armor that had made the journey with them from their old homeland was rusty and broken but they dragged it out and used it. They beat back the dark-skinned people with painted faces and strange voices. Victory was short-lived.

When they returned, Alrek's homestead was aflame and his family...

"I will not deny you, Jantra." He looked at his companions, the men who followed him from across the ocean to this place with its untouched beauty and untamed land.

They had longed for lives without bloodshed. And now...now they would never be free from it. "We offer you our lives."

"Lives? These, I will not take. I will prolong them into forever. I will teach you the ways and the spells of our people so that we might live on." She pushed back her cowl and revealed her long gray hair. Her once-blue eyes now glowed darker than night and her mouth opened to reveal sharp fangs. "But know too I forgive not the loss of my daughters. And so you must be punished."

Alrek

Chapter One

The anguished cries shattered her soul.

Outside, a storm raged, wind and rain and lightning cavorting violently over the earth. The pounding of her heart was indistinguishable from the thunder roaring across the night sky.

In the darkened bedroom, her footsteps thudded against the carpet as the screams echoed in her head. Nausea crowded her throat, but her direction never wavered, her steps never faltered. She knew the way to her pain and sorrow. Knew, too, the ending would remain forever unchanged. Despair rocked through her.

Then both storm and screams quieted.

The sudden silence wrapped around her, squeezing harsh breaths from her constricted lungs.

She looked down.

The woman she knew better than her own heart was sprawled on the floor, staring at her with lifeless eyes. Pale limbs twisted, a heart-shaped face painted with blood, a broken doll – beyond fixing, beyond reach.

She fell to her knees, gathering the limp body into her arms.

Too late. Always too damned late.

Charron jolted upward, flinging off the quilts as she clicked on the bedside lamp. Thunder rumbled and she cursed, looking at the rain sluicing across the window. Lightning flashed, a stab of yellow in the dark, dark night.

Restless, edgy, she left the warm bed, grimacing as cool air whispered across her naked flesh. She walked to the window, unafraid of offending anyone with her nudity. She lived alone on ten acres – the nearest neighbors were a herd of cows.

The dreams. Every night, she went to sleep harboring the hope they wouldn't torture her the same way they tortured her during the day. If she didn't have paint and canvas, she would've gone insane.

Charron walked to the adjoining bathroom and splashed cool water on her cheeks. She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Serious brown eyes assessed her. She had an angular face, stubborn chin and slightly crooked nose.

Then *her* image flashed. Whiskey eyes, smiling mouth and teasing dimples...a ghost in the mirror. She touched the glass, still seeing the face, and whispered, "You're always there. I miss you."

She faded, a memory of love and of sorrow, an ache in Charron's soul. She closed her eyes, then reopened them and stumbled out of the bathroom. She stood in the middle of her bedroom, listening to the rain's ceaseless drone. Regret, guilt, anger—all the old feelings flooded her.

Charron strode to the bedroom's sliding glass doors, unlocked and opened them with trembling hands. She stepped onto the back porch. Freezing rain whipped her body and she shuddered, feeling as though tiny knives pricked her. The crisp smells of wood and earth greeted her, their scents reminded her of home, of family. She gripped the railing, her nails digging into the wet redwood. Only one place could comfort her now. She walked off the deck, ignoring the rain-drenched ground squishing under her bare feet. The night enveloped her like an old friend.

* * * * *

Alrek snapped the neck of the pickpocket and pierced the youth's throat with his elongated teeth. Blood filled his mouth and the sweet-metallic taste soothed his raging hunger. Pushing aside the long greasy hair of the boy, he deepened the gash and gulped the blood, not caring, for once, that it splashed his face and clothes. *So much for Armani*. He'd waited too long to feed and he knew it. The thief had sought shelter in the same dark alley that hid Alrek. But waiting, lusting, indulging...that was the way of a pleasure seeker. He chuckled at the silly name given to his kind by the Vampire Vigil. Oh well. What more did he have to do in this lifetime or any other than to please himself?

Carcass drained, he tossed it to the ground and licked the remaining liquid from his lips. Alrek sighed in satisfaction. A decent snack, to be sure, but he needed to feast.

He needed to fuck.

He caressed the hard-on straining against his pants. With a disinterested gaze, he catalogued the discarded meal's features and clothing. *Disgusting.*

Alrek always got a hard-on during feeding, but he never put it to use with males. Alrek preferred women, preferred giving them ecstasy before stealing their lives. And the blood of women always tasted better, like a vintage wine. The men always tasted like cheap beer.

He smelled the blood on his clothes and lust stirred anew. Where to find a worthy female? One who would offer sustenance and a good lay?

He looked down at his soiled clothing and grimaced. With a simple spell and a snap of his fingers—theatrics demanded the otherwise useless snap—the blood disappeared, the cloth unwrinkled, and the blood smell evaporated.

Then he heard the siren's call—the anguish of a crying woman who would welcome him. And death.

* * * * *

To Alrek's surprise, the woman was not in the city, but somewhere in the farmlands to the east—in another state. The air rushed past him, cold and clean, as he flew toward the stars then evened out to speed toward the woman who unknowingly called to him.

He was strong, ancient and powerful, but even he wondered at the distance. He was drawn to her sorrow. Never had he sensed this depth of grief before, not since...no, it was not possible. Cursed lives had no happy endings. He had long ago destroyed his chance to escape this fate. He had destroyed the only one who'd loved him.

The one being he'd ever loved in a thousand years on this earth.

Now he lived for his own pleasure. No matter how fleeting, how petty, how silly, he took the actions that brought his cold soul some warmth and he cared not what happened to others.

Below him he saw a cottage, grasslands, and a cluster of trees not far from the tiny house. He alighted in a tree and muttered a protection spell. The storm raged around him, but not a drop of rain touched him. He peered down through the branches and saw a woman, slight and pale and naked, lying on the wet ground next to a simple black tombstone. Long blonde hair spilled out onto the wet ground, an offering of gold to the dark soil.

Curled into a ball, she cried, the heels of her hands pressed against her eyes as her body trembled from the onslaught of the rain and her grief.

He jumped and landed near her, as quiet and soft as a feather floating to the ground. "Ssshhh," he whispered to her mind. "No more pain. No more tears. Feel the safety of my arms. Relax, my dearest, and sleep."

When he picked her up, she went quiet and limp. The rain shield protecting him now protected them both. Water sluiced off her delectable body and his gaze was drawn to the perfect curve of her neck.

He licked his lips as hunger gouged him.

He could drain her in seconds, leave her husk next to the grave that meant so much to her, and find another woman to punish with his lust.

And yet...

Her slight, pale body offered a gentle repast. He had not savored one such as her in too long a time. Pleasure was swift, sometimes violent, and always bloody. Sex with him meant the death of his lover. He could not fuck a woman and not take her life. His kind had long-lasting orgasms and the pleasure was increased a hundredfold when taking blood *and* coming. Only his eternal mate could survive sexual intercourse with him. Human females rarely survived.

This little morsel had no chance at all.

He looked at her small breasts, ripe peaches waiting to be plucked. The areolas were small, coral circles and inside those delectable crowns jutted tight nipples, still wet and cold from the rain.

Unable to resist, Alrek lowered his head to one succulent breast. His tongue swirled around the nipple, teasing it with strokes and too-light tastes. Then his mouth closed over the taut peak and suckled. Hard. His blonde prize moaned and strained upward, encouraging his assault on her breast. She tasted of rain, smelled of earth, and somehow tempered the beast snarling inside him.

He raised his head and stopped, surprised to see her staring at him. Her gaze was one he knew, that of a desire-drugged woman, yet she did not seem otherwise under his spell. He tested her mind and found her steady, solid and unafraid. She was...resolved. The foggy net usually cast by his commands was not there.

How had she broken his mental hold?

"I know who you are," she said. "Though I didn't think it was possible for you to be a pervert."

"I'm not."

"Is sex part of the deal then?"

"Yes." Who did she believe him to be? He slipped into her mind again, but this time he found the way blocked. She had natural mind shields. He could break them, of course, but it was rare to encounter such a talent in a human.

"I suppose there are worse ways to go," she mused, "than making love to a handsome man."

"Making love?" He laughed. "That term is for romance novels and foolish virgins. I'm going to fuck you."

Her indrawn breath was one of surprise and desire.

He licked the rain from her lips then covered her mouth with his. She opened her lips and invited his tongue inside. She mated with him, stroke for stroke, moan for

moan, desire for desire. Her hands clutched his shoulders then moved into his hair, bringing him closer.

Their hearts beat as one as they took the same pleasure from the kiss. Hunger battled with his need to be gentle. She deserved a peaceful end, not one wrought by his ceaseless quest to feel even a small measure of joy. A joy found only in the taking of blood and the taking of life.

He pulled away, his breathing ragged.

"Don't stop."

"I won't," he promised.

"My house." She pointed weakly in the direction of the cottage he'd seen from the air.

In less than a second, they were on the back porch. He commanded the door to slide open and it did, shutting behind them.

He swept the covers and pillows from the bed and placed her on it, his gaze ravishing the smooth pale skin of her body. She shifted, opening her legs to him, and he smiled. Her pussy was hairless, glistening with her juices, and ready for him.

With an ancient spell-word, he cleaned and dried her. With another, his clothes disappeared. She appraised his body and his cock with the same frankness he'd used with hers and she smiled the same little smile.

He slipped onto the bed and she snuggled against him. The affectionate gesture surprised him. Never had one been as welcoming as she, not even under his mental influence.

"I've been waiting for you." She snuggled closer, opening her body to his hunger, but her mind remained closed to his.

He brushed a tender kiss across her brow. "Who do you think I am?"

She raised her head and met his stare. "You're Death. And it's about damned time you showed up."

* * * * *

Death laughed.

Charron sat up and frowned at the handsome Grim Reaper. Her grief for Eleane was deep, so paralyzing she had spent every day of the last month waiting for Death. And now he was here.

Laughing.

"I am not Death," said the man. "My name is Alrek."

"I'm Charron." She peered at him. "You are not human."

He cupped her cheek, his hand felt cold against her skin. "True. And I am not Death, but I will give you death all the same."

Charron sighed in relief. Another day in this world without her other half was one too many. Though she had resolved to die, she didn't have the courage to take her own life. And so she had waited. Every day she spent restlessly painting her emotions—colors swirled on canvas. Every night she battled her nightmares.

"Thank you," she said.

"For taking your life?"

She saw the shock in his eyes, then the doubt that she spoke the truth. She shrugged. "Believe what you want. I will not struggle. I'm grateful. If I cannot be with Eleane then I want peace."

"Who is Eleane?"

"Is it important?"

He tilted his head as he thought about it then he smiled. "No."

"Will it hurt? I've had enough of pain."

"It will not hurt," he soothed. "I will give you the greatest joy—and the best fuck—you've ever had then you will sleep."

"Forever."

"Forever." He took her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers. "I've never wanted a woman the way I want you."

"That sounds like a lie."

"Oddly enough, it is not. You stir my blood, make me want, make me crave. Just being near you brings me such pleasure – and torments me."

Charron closed her eyes. His lips felt so soft against her fingers. She knew, in the way she'd always known Eleane's thoughts, that gentleness was not his nature. Why he chose to be so with her would have puzzled her had she cared enough to ponder it.

Right now, all she wanted was the joy – and the peaceful end – he offered.

He took her hand and placed it against the hard length of his penis. She stroked it, her slow perusal soon replaced by short, fast strokes. His moans of pleasure zapped the pit of her stomach. She wanted to please him. More than anything, she wanted him to know the same ecstasy he'd promised to her.

"Suck my cock. I want to come in that hot little mouth of yours."

His eyes, already darker than sin, were opaque. He didn't have the eyes of a human. Only a little white showed around the rim of endless black. She couldn't see any irises, only the obsidian of his gaze. It should've frightened her.

But it didn't.

Charron crawled between his legs, not because he commanded it, but because she wanted to taste him. Alrek had been blessed in the parts department. She kissed his balls and fondled them. She skimmed the length of his cock with her hand, marveling at its hard beauty. Then she licked it from base to tip, swirling her tongue around the head before taking the tip into her mouth and sucking it.

"More!"

She grinned at his demands. For a moment, she felt more than she ever had in the last month – womanly, sensual and powerful.

She savored these gifts offered by Alrek.

Torturing him with tongue swirls and long licks, she finally took his full length into her mouth. But Alrek had had enough of her game. His hands dove into her hair and held her captive as he fucked her mouth. She held on to his thighs and took his strokes, her tongue hastening his orgasm as she teased the cock pumping between her lips.

“Charron!”

Warm, salty come spurted into her mouth and she swallowed it, drinking it like water given to a woman too long in the desert. He bucked and spasmed, his cries of completion wrenched from him, and still he came, and still she drank.

When he finally released her, she licked his penis until it gleamed then she kissed the tip and sat up on her knees.

His expression was unreadable, but she felt the wonderment, the confusion, even the slight feeling of fear emanating from him. Something was different about their union. What was happening between them was something he had not experienced with another lover.

She had not felt this way with another man, either.

Her timing, as always, sucked. She didn’t want to feel anything for this man—no, this creature. She wanted release from this world.

“Have you changed your mind?”

“About what?” His voice sounded like he’d been chewing gravel.

“About killing me.”

“If I had a choice...”

“But you don’t?”

He shook his head. “When I take you, I will kill you. It is not something I can control.” He leaned forward to cup her cheek. “I am too selfish. I must have you, Charron. All of you.”

“Okay.” She slid her hand between her legs and pinched her clit. “Hmmm. I want you to lick my pussy.” Her gaze held his. She rubbed her slick inner folds then spread them apart and showed him her juicy cunt.

He growled. It was a feral sound meant to frighten, but it excited her. Her body felt like one big flame and Alrek only stoked the fire when he flipped her to her back and lifted her legs onto his shoulders.

She thought he would take her then, that he would pierce her flesh with his cock and ride her until her bliss turned to dark endless quiet.

Alrek lowered his head to her pussy and kissed the outer lips. She shuddered at the slight touches, made all more the sweet by his obvious struggle to stay gentle. She knew that he could easily rip her apart with the hands wrapped around her thighs. His strength was nearly visible as were his murderous intentions. He had a black heart, this one. His soul was stained with blood because the price of his passion was too great for any mortal to endure.

She gladly placed herself upon his altar.

‘Sacrifice me.’

‘I will, dear one. I will.’

His tongue slid down her clit and entered her wet heat. He drank from her, suckling the sensitive flesh of her cunt. Slow, calculated strokes drove her mad. An ache stole across her, her belly tight with need, her very core spiraling with tiny streamers of pleasure.

Alrek licked her, placing tiny kisses all around her nub, until finally his lips closed around her clit and sucked. He didn’t stop, didn’t pause, didn’t try to give her time to adjust to the thousand sensations assailing her.

She felt two small stings on either side of her clit.

He sucked her raw, aching flesh, no longer coaxing her bliss but demanding it. Her orgasm shattered, so painfully pleasurable, she screamed. Her hips rose off the bed and she bucked against his mouth.

He refused to release her. His mouth covered her clit and he continued to suck the nub and the flesh around it.

Another orgasm claimed her.

And another.

"Please, Alrek!" She didn't know if she begged for him to release her or for him to keep his mouth on her pussy. The intensity of her orgasms rolled over her, one big wave of unimaginable shocking joy. It was impossible to feel this way. Impossible.

Just when she thought he might hold true to his word to let her leave this world after experiencing the best fuck of her life, he let go. She was only slightly surprised to see the blood dripping from his fangs and chin.

"You bit me."

"And I will again."

"Oh my God. You're a vampire."

Chapter Two

"That's the simplest explanation," said Alrek.

"That was the best orgasm I have ever had."

"So far." His bloody grin was almost boyish.

The sight of her blood on his face should have been revolting. It didn't turn her on, but it didn't disgust her either. Alrek fascinated her. For the first time since Eleane's death, she was interested in something – in someone.

"Turn over."

She did as he asked, without question. Why bother? If he had wanted to hurt her, he would have done so by now. As black-hearted as he might be, he had been kind to her. She was ready to die at his hands. Let him choose when.

"Relax."

The order echoed through her mind. She felt a shift, a push, and a curse echo in her thoughts.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to get through your mental blocks. Can't you turn them off?"

She hadn't realized she'd been using the defenses taught to her. There had been no need for mental blocks. She lived alone. Who would tamper with her mind? Who would want only half of the whole?

"Open your mind and your body to me. Only to me."

Charron unlocked the doors to her thoughts and allowed Alrek entrance. He whispered to her again, a gentle order to relax her body that made her limbs feel loose. The tension she'd unconsciously held in her back dissipated. She pushed her ass against Alrek and wiggled against his hard-on.

He took the hint and slid his cock into her pussy. She shuddered as he filled her and rocked back so that she could take all of him. He moaned as she clenched his length. Then he grasped her hips and tortured her with slow strokes.

She moved her hips, trying to increase his pace, but he went slower still. He felt good inside her. He made her feel whole again. Tears gathered in her eyes as he fucked her, the tender movements belying his true purpose.

He would kill her.

The idea started to lack appeal. If she could spend her days and her nights with one such as Alrek, life might be worth living. He could make her forget her pain. He could forge new memories with her.

"No!" He pulled out of her and flipped her over. His gaze was cold, his eyes glittering like black diamonds. "I am not here to give you hope."

His fangs elongated and she felt the first real sliver of fear. This past month, she'd either felt numb or soul-deep grief. Alrek made her feel pleasure, made her feel hope, and made her feel afraid.

He lay on top of her, his face inches from her, his cock nestled in her pussy, and asked, "Are you ready to die?"

"Do I have to die just yet?"

Alrek didn't know if he should kiss her or kill her. Charron made him feel things he should not feel. He knew she was afraid, he'd felt the chill in her thoughts just before she slammed down her blocks again. And it bothered him that she should be frightened of him.

When, in a thousand years of life, had he ever cared what another thought of him?

Only once.

"I should break your neck and be done with it." He rose on his elbows and looked down at her. "I want to fuck you. Hard. But to do so is to kill you."

"But we just —"

"I moved slowly so that the bloodlust would not overcome me. And from behind because your breasts turn me on and to see them... I just saved your life, damn it."

"You drank my blood and didn't go insane."

"I will admit to a strange reluctance to not rend you asunder. It has never happened to me before." He rolled onto his side. "I have fed from you, I have pleased you, and yet I find I do not want to kill you."

"What a coincidence. I just realized I want to live."

Alrek did not know what to do. He had rarely regretted any of his actions. He had lived his life the way he wanted—doing what pleased him. Now he found his thoughts filled with ways to please *her*. His hunger, the clawing ever-present hunger, had disappeared. He didn't feel the need to drain her. He wanted to fuck her though. And bad. But feeding from her didn't have the same kind of urgency he'd felt earlier.

"I must go." He got out of the bed and with a quick spell, clothed himself.

"Holy shit." Charron stared at him. "Can you do that for anyone?"

He uttered a cloth-spell and robed his former "victim" in a beautiful red silk gown. She snuggled into it. "Thank you."

Her joy at so simple a gift really pissed him off. *I do care about her*. Damn. He conjured a pair of matching slippers. "But don't ask for anything else," he grouched.

Her knowing smile made him feel like an idiot. Then she sobered. "Will I see you again?"

"No."

She looked as though he'd ripped out her heart.

"You can't like me. I almost killed you."

"I requested my own death."

"Be grateful for the second chance."

Charron looked at him sharply, her gaze a mixture of surprise and pain. "I am grateful. I won't waste it."

He didn't want to ask. Didn't want to care. But he had to know. "What about this Eleane?"

"It's time to let her go."

Alrek leaned down and kissed Charron's sweet lips one last time. Her arms wrapped around his neck as if she planned to hold him for all time. But it took only a second and one spell-word...then he was gone.

* * * * *

When Alrek left, Charron cried. Another loss, no matter how small, always reminded her of losing Eleane. The woman she loved more than the world was gone. *I'm so alone.* She shouldn't feel pain at the vampire's departure. They'd had sex, he'd spared her life, and, in the blink of an eye, left her.

God, she was so sick of despair.

The next morning, she awoke and decided three things—to let go of her life and memories with Eleane, to sell her house and move to the city, and to find out more about Alrek and his kind so she could track his ass down and give him a piece of her mind. Or maybe just a piece.

She hadn't decided yet.

Selling the house would be easy, but leaving behind the memories would not. Everything she'd shared with Eleane was here. And maybe that was why she needed to leave.

The day passed quickly as she went, room by room, and cleared out the clutter. Packing Eleane's things was like folding away the corners of her own soul. She didn't want to do this. Giving Eleane's things to charity and letting strangers take the furniture and knickknacks and plants meant she was never coming back. As long her dresses hung in the closet and her shampoo stayed in the shower...as long as her favorite cooking pot stayed on the stove and her diamond earrings stay scattered on the bedroom dresser...then she wasn't really gone.

Charron wept, but these weren't the anguished tears brought on by survivor's guilt and ceaseless nightmares. These tears cleansed her, absolved her, and released her to live again. Her best friend, her confidante, the person she loved most in this world was dead.

Charron finally accepted this truth.

* * * * *

Two days passed, then three. At the end of the fourth day, Alrek found himself outside Charron's cottage watching her purge the little house of its memories. Whoever Eleane had been, Charron was letting her go. Though sadness graced her smiles, he knew her healing had begun. The sorrow that had drawn him to her, that had almost made her his victim of blood and lust, was melting away like the last snow of winter.

He stood outside her living room window, cloaked in a protection spell, and felt like one of those cartoon dogs that sat outside a restaurant window unable to dine on the succulent filet mignon just inches away but barred by the glass.

The gnawing, terrible hunger that had ravaged him since the day he was cursed no longer drove him to kill or to fuck. He had no desire for any female except Charron. He coaxed his victims and drank from them, but the frenzy that so often accompanied feeding and so effectively clouded his mind and actions did not appear. He had not killed anyone since the pickpocket in the alley...the same night he had made love to Charron.

Alrek smiled. *Making love*. Such a silly phrase. A woman's words. A woman's demands. They desired tenderness, wanting only to be cared for, to be loved. Love he could not offer. But tenderness...somewhere in his dark soul he still had that. Yes, he could still remember the gentleness he'd known before he chose this hell.

He waited while she finished packing one more box. When it looked as if she would try to pack another, he sent the insistent suggestion for her to sleep. She rose and

showered, yawning and stretching her arms as she crawled into her bed, damp and naked. Seconds after she closed her eyes, she slept.

With a muttered spell-word, Alrek appeared in her bedroom. He sat in a nearby chair and watched the rhythmic rise and fall of Charron's chest. A short wave of his hand — *violà!* — her covers slid off her body and he was treated to the feast he had known days before. He would not touch her, not physically.

Relaxing in the chair, he closed his eyes. Before Charron had taken another breath, he was walking the corridors of her mind. Alrek molded himself to look as he had before he'd been cursed. His beautiful Aliea had loved his blue eyes — she said so every time he came home from the fields. Maybe Charron would too. Yes, he would give himself the blue eyes of a human and not the dark stare of a monster.

Then, without hesitation, he slipped into her dreams.

'Beloved.' He crawled into the bed next to her and kissed her brow. 'I've missed you.'

'Where have you been?' she asked in a sleepy voice. 'It's been so long. Too long.' She nibbled the line of his jaw and pressed her naked body against his. The rasp of her hard nipples against his chest made his pulse leap. With a sigh, he pulled her closer, his hand finding the soft curve of her hip. His thumb traced the contour then he cupped her buttock.

'Love me, Alrek.' Her restless hands trailed his chest, her palms rubbing his nipples. She draped a leg over his and arched back to show him her breasts.

He took the sweet bounty she offered and kissed their undersides before sliding his tongue around her puckered nipples. A thrill of delight stabbed him as she guided his hand to the slick folds of flesh between her legs.

'Touch me,' she breathed. 'Please...'

His finger stroked her clit.

His mouth suckled her nipple.

Desperate pleasure rose, crested, threatened...

Alrek entered her, hard and fast, and sheathed his cock until the tip touched the entrance to her womb. She shuddered and writhed, her slow movements turning to urgent bucking.

He laughed against her neck and tortured her with his stillness. But he knew that soon, the frantic desire holding her captive would envelop him. Her hands were everywhere – his thighs, buttocks, back, shoulders – sweeping across the bulging muscles in the arms that held her, cupping the square jaw, trailing the strong cords in his neck.

'I want you more than anything...than anyone,' he said. He kissed her lips, their soft touch a promise, a tribute, a sacrifice.

Then he was moving, pumping into her with a fierce possession that took her breath away.

'Come for me, beloved,' he said, his voice hoarse with passion. 'Come with me.'

'Yes.' She clawed at his back, her hips meeting his as he fucked her. 'Yes!'

Orgasm claimed him just as sweet and beautiful and strong as his indefinable craving for Charron. She was with him too, her vaginal muscles clenching his cock, a low moan caught in her throat.

Alrek faded from the dream and opened his eyes. Charron lay in twisted sheets, a fine sheen of sweat on her body. Her hips were still arched, the last tremors of orgasm holding her in thrall. She collapsed to the bed with a small sigh, a smile ghosting her lips before deep sleep claimed her.

In dreams, he was almost human again. Emotions glittered like fool's gold and he could remember what it was like to feel. He didn't need to take blood when he entered dreams. He didn't need to be a vampire. Longing was a ghost that flitted and faded.

Every day, he wanted to be human again. To feel fully again.

To love again.

* * * * *

A Month Later...

"They're not vampires exactly," said the young man with thick glasses and shaggy hair. "More like really evolved humans with some mutated genes. Maybe alien genes. We don't know. They need human blood to survive, but their feeding rituals are linked with their sexuality. To feed is to..." He paused and blushed. "That is, most have sex with their victims to increase their pleasure. Unfortunately, most victims don't survive the encounters. The vamps can't separate the two acts."

"Can they have sex and not feed?"

"I don't know. They can feed without having sex, but they prefer both. Feeding is what drives their frenzy for sex."

"With men and women?"

"Most of 'em don't care. We think it has something to do with the alien gene manipulation. You know, they don't have emotions like we do. Their ability to feel something, anything, is brief."

"And usually connected to feeding and screwing at the same time." That much she'd gleaned from surfing the Internet.

"More coffee?" The waitress poured the black swill into their cups without waiting for a response then pattered off to another table. The café was seedy, unkempt, and smelled like week-old split pea soup. But Charron didn't care. This was the first time she'd been able to meet with someone from the Vampire Vigil. Purportedly, the group had been around in some form or another for the last thousand years—about the same amount of time as the not-really-vampires who roamed the earth.

"You mentioned aliens?"

"No one's been able to catch one, mind you, but we have managed to scrape off blood and saliva from...places. The DNA's weird. Humanlike, but it's got all kinds of nonhuman stuff in it. We think it's a possibility aliens visited Earth and mated with some of our females, creating this race of beings."

Charron nodded, scribbling notes on her legal pad. But while she knew Alrek and his kind could fly, drink blood and conjure objects, she drew the line at alien hybrids. "What about their ability to make things appear and disappear?"

"No one's seen a vamp in action these days. We have reports from ancient times that confirm their magical abilities."

Sitting in this crappy diner with this skinny representative of the Vampire Vigil was the closest she'd gotten to Alrek in a month of ceaseless searching and researching.

"We've dug up some ancient references about vamps ending their curse by finding their eternal mates," said her companion, who, when introducing himself, refused to give her a name.

"Mates? I thought they couldn't make others. The few people who've survived attacks don't turn into anything except a therapist's dream client."

"That's true. Whoever they are, they can't procreate." He dug into the sugar container and pulled out five pink packets. She grimaced when he dumped them all into his mug. "We can't find a single reference in any written record, modern or historic, that details humans turning to vamps or vamps having babies. As far as we can tell, all of these creatures are male. They don't have any female counterparts—so how could they find eternal mates?"

Indeed. She looked down at her notepad as he drank what must have been the worst coffee ever made. One sip of hers confirmed the taste and consistency of motor oil.

When her informant said nothing else, she figured the well was dry. She needed to go home and follow up on the information this geek had given to her.

"Thank you for your time." Charron opted for a friendly wave instead of a handshake. The guy looked like he needed a shower and a good delousing.

"Wait!" He gestured for her to stay seated. He leaned forward and his stringy hair dipped into his coffee cup. "We've gotten reports that one of them has stopped killing. He takes blood from the riffraff, but leaves them alive."

Her heart tha-thumped so loud she figured the entire West coast could hear it. Was it Alrek? "How do you know about this vampire gone good?"

"Victim reports. Eyewitness accounts. We've gotten enough information about this one that we believe it's true. His behavior is unprecedented."

Charron believed that the Vampire Vigil had combined myth, legend and flat-out lies with some facts and truths about these vampires. The Vigil group was one out of many through the centuries that had tried to track Alrek's species, but since they rarely came into contact with vampires, they just made up stuff. She knew the garlic, cross, holy water and mirror lore were untrue. But had Alrek stopped being a pleasure seeker? Did he think of her the way she thought of him? Every day, no matter what she did, he was there, in her mind, a winding dark ribbon of fear and of strange comfort. Since that night, he'd owned her soul...and her heart.

"Again, thank you for your time." Before he could protest, Charron scooted out of the booth and turned to go.

"If you're thinking about tracking a vamp, you should reconsider."

Charron paused, looked over her shoulder, and asked, "Why?"

"Because you'll end up a tasty late-night snack."

The horrified delight in his voice creeped her out. She suspected the members of the Vampire Vigil were not a "scientific watch group" as proclaimed on their website. No, these guys acted more like fantasy role-players and on full-moon nights probably wandered the streets in black capes and fake fangs.

With a small smile and a quick wave, she hurried away. She left the café, grateful to escape its atmosphere of deterioration and old-food stench. The parking lot was empty except for her Honda. The drive home was tense. Foreboding, as clean and cold as a stream, coursed through her and she didn't know why she felt so disturbed. When she pulled into the small back parking lot of her apartment complex, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Her new apartment was small, but it was an historic brick building that had once been a fire station. Huge elm trees lined the streets and well-kept homes with large grassy yards offered the comfort and space she'd left behind. Here, she found a semblance of peace close to that she'd felt on her and Eleane's little farm. Eleane would laugh her ass off if she knew Charron had moved to the big city, alone, just to chase down a man who didn't want her.

The evening passed as had all the evenings before it. She painted. Made dinner. Watched the news. And, promptly at 11p.m., she went to bed. The terrible dream that haunted her on the farm had all but disappeared. New dreams assaulted her nightly. Sensual, erotic dreams...so intense she orgasmed in her sleep. These dreams featured Alrek as he might have looked as a human—laugh lines around blue eyes, lips made for kissing, and muscled, tan body waiting for her to touch, to taste.

Each night, the dream Alrek would crawl into bed with her and touch her the way a husband touched his wife. He called her "beloved" and brought her such passion, such joy, she wanted never to awaken again.

As she waited for sleep and for Alrek, she faced the truth. She searched for her lover not because of their one night together, but because of these dreams. These wonderful dreams offered a life of love and happiness for them both. And soon, she slumbered...

Chapter Three

'Beloved,' he crooned in her ear.

She woke, a smile on her lips, and turned to wrap her arms around Alrek's shoulders. He kissed her, a long slow worshipping of her lips that melted her doubts about his intentions.

'Are you here to love me?' she asked, a teasing note in her voice.

His mouth trailed a line down her jaw then she felt the cold points of his fangs against her throat.

'No, my love,' he whispered against the tender flesh of her neck, 'I'm here to kill you.'

Alrek pierced her throat and she screamed, struggling against his impossible strength. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

The dream shifted, changed.

Eleane stood near the stove stirring the contents in a large pot. Aromas filled the small space and she recognized a few — cooking meat, tangy tomato, sweet basil.

'Stew for dinner again?'

'People who can't cook, can't complain.'

Charron sat down at the table and started peeling the pile of carrots on the cutting board. 'At least I can cut vegetables.'

'It's a talent worthy of a television appearance.'

'Anyone ever tell you sarcasm is the weapon of a weak mind?'

'Nope.' Eleane banged the big wooden spoon on the edge of the pot then placed it on a folded napkin on the stove. She sat across from Charron and grabbed a handful of herbs to chop.

'Are you going to see him again?'

Charron looked up in surprise. 'See who?'

'Alrek.'

Anxiety slipped through her body like tiny rivers of acid. 'How do you know about him?'

'He's the one who murdered me.'

* * * * *

Charron woke, throwing the covers off her nude body. She stared blindly in the dark, her breathing ragged. Seconds passed before she realized she wasn't alone. She snapped on the bedside lamp and peered into the shadowy corner of her room. But she didn't have to see his face to know who stood there, watching her.

"You've been looking for me." Alrek stepped into the dim light looking as dark-hearted and handsome as she remembered. "Still interesting in dying?"

"No."

"Then why the chase, beloved?"

She sucked in a breath. "The dreams. Oh my God. You've been in my dreams."

"It's the only way to have you without hurting you." Regret shadowed his gaze then he looked away, almost as if he was unable to face her ire.

Charron stared at him. "You've been with me the whole time, haven't you? In my mind, my thoughts, my dreams."

"Yes."

"Did you kill her?"

"Who?"

She rose from the bed and stood toe-to-toe with him. His appreciative glance at her breasts didn't deter her. She poked his chest with her finger. "Eleane. Did you murder my twin sister, you bastard?"

"No." He tipped her chin and brushed a kiss across her lips. "You know how she died."

For a moment she wanted to deny it. She wanted to blame him, blame anyone for Eleane's loss. But she couldn't ignore the truth. "Why did she take her own life? *Why?*"

"You may never know the answer, beloved."

Charron turned from his touches because desire was already coiling hot and tight in her belly. He was a monster...an evil man who cared for nothing but his own pleasure.

"I care for *you*." He stalked her until her back hit the wall. "You are the most fascinating female I've ever met."

"It's hardly a compliment considering you've killed most of the women you've met."

'It's true just the same.'

"Stay of my head, damn it!" She ducked under his arms and stalked to the bed. Consciously, she erected mind blocks against his mental invasion.

'Don't bother. I already know how to get around them.'

"Stop it. I want you to leave."

'Do you?'

Though he stayed across the room, she felt the slow slide of his fingers across her throat.

'I have not given you pleasure? I have not given you a worthy dream of love and devotion?'

"I've lived too long in dreams."

The ghostly fingers traveled to her navel and stroked her abdomen.

"Alrek, you're torturing me with a half-life. For so long, I was neither alive nor dead. I don't want that anymore. I want to feel. To live."

"You followed me here. You want me."

He dared to use his invisible touch to test the wetness of her pussy. She heard the echo of male satisfaction in her mind. "Damn it, Alrek!"

The touches disappeared and she felt his mental withdrawal as keenly as a knife blade.

"I am shocked to realize that I wish you only happiness." His gaze revealed no emotion. "Whether or not I am part of it."

"Can I have all of you?"

"The dream?"

"No. The reality. All of you, all of the time. No-holds-barred, no secrets and no lies."

"It's impossible."

"Because to take me is to kill me?"

"The blood lust... it's uncontrollable." He looked away from her, his mouth a tight line. "We can feed without sex, but it's painful. We can't have sex without feeding."

"What if I want to take the chance?"

His gaze pinioned her. "I will not."

She closed her eyes against the hurt ripping open her heart. She had somehow believed the dream was possible, that Alrek was meant for her, that his intervention in the life she'd been wasting...oh God. Nothing. A game. She represented a fascinating toy and nothing more. He'd lived a millennium gobbling up little girls like her for dinner.

Tears welled in her eyes. "There is nothing for us."

"No, beloved. There is not."

Did she imagine the regret in his voice? Was it possible for a vampire to feel remorse? To feel love?

'No. I feel nothing. I am sorry.'

'Liar. Go, goddamn it. Leave me alone.'

"As you wish." In the blink of an eye, he vanished. Charron hugged herself as she cried, weary from wanting the impossible and from ceaseless grief.

When she heard the shuffling of shoes across her floor, she looked up, her battered heart hoping Alrek had reappeared, but the figure that lurched across the room was not

her lover. A blur of a masked face, the growl of a low voice, incredible pain as something heavy struck her temple...then nothing.

* * * * *

After Charron's banishment, Alrek returned to the abandoned warehouse he often used as a sanctuary. A comfortable four-poster bed was its main attraction, but the large screen TV and DVD were his true joys. He owned more than a thousand movies and he never tired of watching them.

When he entered his domain, he knew immediately he was not alone.

"Thórr."

"Alrek."

Tall and muscular with blond hair and the dark eyes that marked their curse, none would guess the man had once been the cleric for their village. He always found a place, a reason for every living creature, even the two strange women they had found on the shores of the new land a millennium ago. But not even his faith in all that was good and just had survived Jantra's punishment. No, Thórr had lost his soul just the same.

The men Alrek had known as brothers, as friends, as warriors...they could not tolerate one another—another side effect of the change wrought by the old witch. Aggression turned to killing rage. Not long after Jantra had finished their training, she died. Without her power of intervention and careful guidance, their urges turned uncontrollable and primal.

"It's as if it all happened yesterday, isn't it?"

Alrek bared his teeth in a dangerous smile. "Yes."

"Delicia survived." He held up some papers. "Proof, my brother. She lived and had offspring."

His heart clenched. *Aliea*. "So what?"

"We can mate with her descendents."

Shock froze him. "How do you know?"

"Research. Years and years and years of research." Thórr placed the papers on top of the television. He knew better than to stand too close to Alrek. Being within a hundred feet of another cursed male was nearly suicidal, much less the mere three feet that separated them. "But not just any descendent. Twin girls. Our salvation is a twin female born from Delicia's line."

"Impossible."

"Is it?" Thórr's steady gaze betrayed a hint of anger. "Or, perhaps, is it something you've known all along?"

"If I'd known it, I would have spent the last thousand years searching for these women."

"And yet you found one."

Cold seeped into Alrek's belly. "Charron."

"What of her sister?" The urgency in Thórr's voice sparked a vague sense of sympathy for Alrek's old friend.

"She is dead. Charron grieves for her."

"Damn it."

Alrek moved to the windows, widening the distance between them. For all their lack of feelings in day-to-day life, they felt rage and passion to the point of madness and pain. It was why they hunted, why they fed and had sex, why they killed. Had Jantra lived to see her handiwork, she would be shamed by it. They were all monsters who desired nothing more than...

"Love. A mortal life. Children." Thórr, too, moved further away. "We desire all we gave up that day so long ago."

"Even if we found a mate, we cannot lift the curse." Alrek scowled at Thórr. "And stay the fuck out of my thoughts."

Thórr laughed. "Don't project them with such clarity. I thought you mastered mental blocks."

He ignored the barb. Charron...his mate? Such a miracle would explain why he could not kill her and why he could not stay away from her. He had heard her cries from a distance that he should not have been able to traverse with his hearing or with his mental abilities. And she had rare ESP skills not found in most humans. Was it possible? Was Charron the one who could save him?

"She would grow old and die. I could not bear it."

"You don't know that. So much has been lost, Alrek. We remember the spells and the training and the limitations of our punishment. But Jantra's way of life is gone. Her rituals and rites, her celebrations and holy days—all that she wished to survive along with her race—we've forgotten. We have spent too long seeking our own pleasure. We have parted ways with our humanity, our compassion. We feel sorry for ourselves, you know that?"

"We are certainly pathetic." Alrek's lips twisted. "Do you remember the rituals and holy days?"

"Some, my friend. But there is no reason we cannot honor her intentions by creating our own."

"We couldn't get together. We'd kill each other."

"But our mates...if we could mate, there is chance to have our village again."

Alrek nodded, allowing himself to feel, for one moment, the terrible loneliness that had soaked his soul. He missed the men who had been his family. "I don't feel like killing you just yet. You may have a point. Ever since I met Charron I've felt...different."

"Find her. Open your heart and your life to her. See where it leads. Your hope is our hope, Alrek. If there is a way to live again in the world of men, you will find it."

"Thank you, Thórr." He turned toward his friend. "Why did you seek me out? Why tell me about Delicia's descendents?"

"Because I miss you too." Thórr smiled then disappeared, as quiet as a whisper.

A faint flicker of hope shone in his darkness. Alrek wouldn't let it go. Not now. He sought Charron's mind, wanting to link with the woman who'd offered him her life. When he connected, bright stabs of pain drove him to his knees. Her thoughts became his...

Alrek! If I had another chance, I would not let you leave. I would tell you the truth. What I feel for you is impossible, silly, childish, but it's true.

Her body prickled, arched, jolted with wild streamers of pain. She cried out, angry tears trailing her cheeks.

Can you hear me, vampire? I love you.

* * * * *

The stringy-haired man with bad breath and worse body odor electrocuted the naked blonde on the marble slab with a glee that emboldened other members of the Vampire Vigil. There were six of them and before the man, code name Vlad, could juice her again, his hand was stilled.

"She's vamp food, that's all. She's never going to give up her master." He licked his lips. "We wanna fuck her."

One guy grabbed her tits and squeezed. Excited by the prospect of free sex, he clambered onto the altar and unzipped his pants.

Charron's eyes fluttered open and she zeroed in on the little penis flopping out of the khakis. Nausea roiled in her stomach, fear was a living, clawing thing. But she'd be goddamned if she'd give any satisfaction to these sadistic nerds. "You couldn't fuck a Barbie with that needle dick."

"Bitch." The Tit Grabber pushed down his pants and wrapped a hand around his cock. "I'll fuck you so hard, you'll end up in Cleveland."

"Promises, promises."

The arm that arched toward her cheek stopped as though it had smacked a brick wall. Tit Grabber was thrown off the altar with such force, he flew into the back wall and slid unconscious to the floor.

All the candles lit around the altar were snuffed out simultaneously.

"Shit! It's the vamp!"

A jumble of noises, shouts and screams followed.

"Vlad? Where the hell are the stakes? Stake him! Aaaaahhh. He's got me. He's got—"
Gurgle.

Before Charron could draw another breath, she was snuggled into a large four-poster bed so soft a cloud would be jealous. "Alrek?"

"Yes?" He lay next to her, naked as she, and stroked her hair away from her face.

"What the hell took you so long?"

"I had to park the car." He kissed her forehead. "You love me?"

"I'm afraid so."

He kissed her, savoring her lips like a fine wine or rather, a Grade A pint of blood. Nibbling her jawline, he sought the tender flesh of her neck.

"Are you making love to me?"

"Hmmm..."

"What about imminent death?"

His hand cupped a breast and he pressed a kiss on the budding nipple. "Some new information has come to light."

"Oh?"

He tweaked her nipple, tugging on the now hard peak until she gasped. Then he circled it with his tongue and suckled. The other breast received the same sensuous treatment. Because he was connected with her mind, he felt her pleasure and her love.

Bright, shiny, encompassing, it was like gaining a new soul. "Charron," he murmured against her flesh, "I love you too."

As he stroked her body with fingers and tongue, he was patient and tender, two qualities he had not possessed in too long a time. She squirmed beneath him, needy and hot, breathless and wanting. Her hands cupped his balls then caressed his cock until her urgency was his.

When he slid between her legs and entered her wet heat, the need to drink from her was nearly as great as his need for physical completion.

She didn't protest when his fangs pierced her neck. She didn't cry out when he drank her life's fluids as he pumped his cock into her pussy. In her mind, he sensed the rightness of both acts. She didn't feel disgust at his desire for blood. She was as frenzied and as ravenous as he.

Pleasure, more intense, more pure, more beautiful, than any he'd known in the last thousand years poured through him, a million sensations of light and sound wrapping around him.

Charron's orgasm claimed him too, as she shouted his name and bucked against him, milking his cock with her pulsations. He felt her bliss as keenly as his own, and blessed the day he was granted a second chance.

When he lifted his head, he muttered a spell-word to heal the wounds on her neck. Her thousand-watt smile batted away the last of his doubts.

"I'm not dead."

"No."

"You're a lousy Grim Reaper."

"That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me." He kissed her, a long sweet worshipping of her mouth. When he was finished, at least for the next two seconds, he raised up to study her face. He would never tire of her. Never.

"Your eyes..." she whispered, tracing his eyebrows.

"Yes. I have two."

"Very funny, smarty pants. It's just...I've never seen a more beautiful blue."

Alrek stilled. *Could it be?* He conjured a mirror and, taking a deep breath, looked. His eyes were no longer the opaque black he'd grown to despise. They were not only blue with whites and irises, they were the eyes of a human man. "I'll be damned."

Charron laughed. "Not anymore, Alrek. Not anymore."

Úlfr

Chapter Four

Two years ago...

"I offer sacrifice, holy one." The woman's angry tone betrayed her words of supplication. She held the teenage girl by the shoulders, a mother's tender grasp belying the fear she would wake the monster.

Úlfr stood at the back of the cave, knowing the humans sensed his presence, but could not see him. The mother's anger battled with terror. She had not wished to give up her daughter to the village's dark god. Before, the villagers offered only men, at first the old, then the sick, and finally the young. He turned away the boys in their first blush of life, out of some vague sense of honor or decency he no longer felt, and the villagers, frightened he might choose his own victims, held a lottery.

His prize? A nubile, pretty virgin. The defiant girl with dark eyes and hair as black as a raven's wing tried to hide her fright behind the guise of bravery.

"Go, Mama." She slipped out of her mother's embrace. "It is my time."

"*Madre de Dios!*" The mother fell to her knees, begging. "Take me, Dark One. Save my daughters."

Daughters?

He probed into the mother's mind and saw that she had twin girls. She'd been a widow since her terminally ill husband had offered himself as a sacrifice several years ago. Now the villagers had forced her to choose between her daughters. This one—*Roja*?—had stepped forward in order to protect her sibling.

Úlfr watched the drama unfold with only vague interest. He'd been the Dark One for this village for the last century, stumbling upon it in his journey to find a cure. He finally understood there was no solution to his ravenous need for drinking blood and having sex. There was no death for his kind either. So he did as his cursed brothers did,

he sought his own pleasure. It made no difference to him, male or female, as long as he could fuck and feed and assuage the inhuman ache of hunger that haunted him always.

In return for one human every month, he protected the villagers as he was once protected by Jantra and her daughters. They had bumper crops, easy weather, and simple, happy lives. At least until it was time to offer sacrifice.

He looked at the girl, tested her mind, and paused. Mental shields, probably unknown to her, kept him from seeing her thoughts. *Strong too.* It took a full thirty seconds to break through them. With some training, she could hone her natural psychic abilities. "She is only sixteen."

"I am eighteen." Her sweet voice rang clear, holding none of the fear he knew trembled inside her.

"You are a liar, my dear Ro."

"Por favor, me toma, la Oscuridad Uno". The old woman's eyes filled with tears.

"No, nadie esta noche. Tome a su hija y vaya".

¿"Pero qué diré yo a los aldeanos"?

"Tell the villagers that I accept their sacrifice and will return on her eighteenth birthday to claim her." He stepped from the shadows and walked toward them, making sure the young Roja knew his carnal intent from the heat of his gaze. "Tell them she is a great gift...that she is so great a gift I need no others from them ever again."

The mother's eyes widened. "But what of our village? We rely on your kindness, *señor*. Our crops, our families..."

"I will not abandon the village." He picked up a black curl draping Roja's shoulder and tugged the silky strand. With an invisible touch, he stroked up the curve of her hip, across her rib cage, and cupped her small breast. He was rewarded by a tiny shudder and the barest glint of desire. He smiled. "You will treat her as a goddess. The best food, the best place to live, the best of everything until I return."

He turned his gaze to the mother and sensed her relief at the sudden reprieve. She would have her daughter for two more years, but he didn't care what his decision gave to her. Some long-dead sense of honor still existed inside him and would not allow him to take the child.

But he would take the woman.

* * * * *

Present Day, one week before Roja's eighteenth birthday...

"Is it true, Thórr?"

"You risk death to ask?"

Úlfr paced the ancient church's aisle, his rapid movements causing him to appear a blur to human eyes. "Why do you hang out in this place? God has abandoned us."

"We abandoned God." Thórr floated above the altar, his legs crossed, his hands resting on his thighs, and watched his friend's agitated movements. "I feel at peace here."

"You don't do it, do you? You don't kill and you don't fuck. How?"

"I am cursed the same as you. I do both and you know it."

"But you haven't forgotten how to feel guilty."

Thórr laughed. "That is true."

"Alrek...he is human again?"

"Why not ask Alrek?"

Úlfr stopped pacing and sighed. "The last time I saw him we fought. It was a bloody, ugly battle. It's difficult to hold a conversation when someone is trying to remove your head."

"Why come to me?"

"You are the only one of us who somehow managed to hold on to the old ways. You can still feel."

"I remember what it was like to feel. It is not the same as feeling."

"Thórr, is he human again?"

"Find out for yourself."

Úlfr rolled his eyes. "Fine." He sat in one of the crumbling wooden pews. "I found a woman. She is a twin with psychic abilities. The message you sent...how do I know if she's from Delicia's line? Can she save me?"

"You will know."

"How?"

"Must I tell you again to seek out Alrek and ask him these questions?" Thórr sank down, unfolded his legs, and allowed his feet to touch the floor. He walked to the altar and stared at the offerings of herbs, the two faceless statues of a man and a woman, and the long curved knife Jantra had given to him. "The other twin—is she alive?"

"Yes."

"Then you may have found hope for me too." He turned and risked looking directly at Úlfr. "Find Alrek."

Úlfr inclined his head and for the briefest of moments Thórr swore he saw regret in his old friend's eyes.

* * * * *

When Úlfr arrived in Alrek's warehouse home, Alrek's woman had tea ready. She bade him to sit at the small table with a setting for two and poured the tea brewed with handpicked herbs.

He picked up the cup and sipped the earthy brew. He smiled. "How did you know this was my favorite herb combination?"

Her left brow rose and she offered only a smile as response.

"Where is Alrek?"

"My name is Charron."

"I know." Úlfr drank more tea though the pleasure at its familiar taste had already faded. "Do you know Jantra's teas are the only liquid we can consume other than blood?"

"Do you know I am married to a vampire and do not need an education about your kind's preferences, rituals or behaviors?"

Disappointment stayed his hand on the delicate china cup. It clinked against its companion plate as he released it. "He is not human? Thórr was mistaken?"

"Úlfr." His name was a sigh of empathy. "Alrek is the first to go through the process and it's only been three months. Is he human? Is he monster? He is both. He still needs blood, but only mine. He still holds the abilities to read thoughts and influence a human's actions, but he can no longer conjure or transport."

"He has lost his magic?"

"Most of it."

"Can he feel?"

"Yes." Alrek's voice intruded and they turned to see him walking through the door that opened from the staircase. He smiled and Úlfr saw genuine delight in Alrek's gaze. *His blue-eyed gaze...* the black monster gaze was gone. When he reached them, he shook Úlfr's hand and pounded him on the back.

"Úlfr! It is good to see you. Only Thórr visits us now, but I am glad my other brother seeks us out. We are lonely for company."

Charron's lips twisted into a grin. "Are we?"

Alrek leaned down and kissed her, the gesture so tender, so real Úlfr was taken aback. *Alrek can feel again.* The shadow of jealousy, of longing, of hope stroked him with ghostly fingers.

"Are you human?"

"I do not know. It seems the curse is lifting slowly." Alrek unbuttoned his shirt and pulled the cloth from his shoulder. The small tattoo, three leaves within a circle, was fading. This was Jantra's mark. It was a permanent reminder of their punishment.

"We believe that when the tattoo is gone, Alrek will be fully human." Charron's loving gaze sought her husband's. Again, Úlfr felt a twinge of envy.

"Mortal?" Úlfr traced the rim of the teacup. "You will die."

"It is the way it should work, my friend. To live and to love and when it is time, move on to the next plane of existence. Everyone is immortal. But only the humans shed their flesh."

"That's a terrible visual." Úlfr shook his head. "You've been talking to Thórr too much."

"Then come around more often." Alrek pulled out a chair and sat, winding his fingers through his wife's and pulling her hand to his lips for a quick kiss. "We welcome you any time."

"Why don't we feel the urge to kill each other?"

"You don't feel the urge to kill humans until hunger sets upon you. I don't feel the urge to kill another cursed immortal within my space because my humanity is returning."

"You are more human than vampire."

Alrek's happiness was almost palpable. Úlfr sensed it the way he sensed the emotions of humans. He tasted it, like a thirsty man tastes a single drop of water and wants, no, *needs* to drink from the well.

"I found a twin girl with psychic abilities. How do I know if she's from Delicia's line? What if I risk...what if I kill her?"

"If she is your soul mate, it will be impossible."

* * * * *

The night Roja Sanchez turned eighteen and was bade to return to the Dark One's cave, the village women came to the house to prepare her. They massaged her with special oils then cleansed her in a hot bath where they scrubbed her smooth skin until it was as soft as a flower petal. Her hair was brushed until it shone. She wore no makeup, but she needed none. She was not allowed undergarments. What was the point of panties when everyone knew the Dark One's blood sacrifice also meant the taking of her virginity?

They put on her a red silk dress with spaghetti straps. It drifted just above her knees and it offered a tantalizing view of her breasts. It was designed to please the beast who wanted her life. For a while, the dress's color was debated. Should they not choose black and send a message to the Dark One that her people would miss her?

Hah! What a lie!

In the end, red was chosen because of her name and of her temper. It was also the color of blood, of sacrifice. Red suited her very well. Besides, what did she care the color of the last dress she wore?

The villagers did as the monster asked only because they feared for their own lives. Even her mother had fallen into resentment and anger. She became the martyr of the village, the true victim of the beast since it was her flesh and blood that would be their final offering. Yes, she made sure Roja had the best food, but only allowed her daughter a few bites before taking it away so that she could eat it. They lived in the best house, the one that had once been the abode of their healer who, in disgust for these cowards, left the village, and they did no work at all. Roja craved action, to work and to provide, but she was forbidden lest she anger you-know-who.

Her mother had gotten fat and greedy and lazy. Gone was the woman who had loved her and her sister, Azure. Perhaps...perhaps that woman had never existed. Everything in Roja's life was a lie. And what of Azure? She was sick and pale and rarely left her room. She refused to talk to anyone, especially Ro. Ro knew Azure loved her,

but the frail twin was unable to handle the emotional loss. She had cut herself off from her sister to protect her own fragile health.

The only truth was the Dark One. He had not lied to her. He would take her. He would kill her. She respected him for that, though after the last two years of being fawned over, of being given the best of what their small village had to offer, of being both pitied and hated...she wished he had taken her that night.

The village had planned a big celebration. Women spent the last few days baking and cooking. Now men created a huge bonfire. Decorations were hung. People laughed and joked, their hearts light. Roja would rid them of the Dark One's need for blood and retribution, but they would still reap his generous favor.

When it was time to go, the village women left Roja alone with her mother so they could say their good-byes. The villagers would walk Roja to the edge of the path that led to the cave, bid her farewell, and allow her the lonely walk to her death as they returned to the village to celebrate their freedom.

Her mother looked at her, her mouth a tight line. Her heart had turned to stone and Roja grieved for the loss. Was this the woman who had once offered her life to save her daughter's?

"You have saved the village. You should be proud."

"I'm scared, Mama."

"It is your duty."

"Why? No one here except Azure is worth saving. You are all selfish and evil."

Her mother raised her hand as if to strike her then lowered her shaking arm. Roja smirked even as her heart ached. Mama did not wish to anger the Dark One by leaving a mark on his sacrifice. Only he was allowed to perpetrate violence against her.

"Pueda sus pecados sean castigados."

“Our sins have been punished, daughter. For a hundred years we have suffered. For too long we gave our loved ones to the beast to gain prosperity.” Her mother’s face softened. “It is what it is. You will be the last. Be happy for us.”

Ro had no words. Her mother asked her to feel happiness for people who cared nothing for her or for her so-called sacrifice? Would they remember that her blood had been spilled so that they could have bountiful crops, good health, and intact families? Never again would they worry about the Dark One’s terrible need and how to assuage it.

Tears threatened but she willed them away. She would not cry. She would not give her mother or the other villagers her tears. They already had her life. Duty? No. She would not take walk the Death Path for duty, but for love, for Azure. Before she offered her life to the Dark One, she would beg a better life for her twin. Her sister needed help and she needed to be in a place where she could prosper and be cared for. She had to escape this village and go somewhere safe in case the monster went back on his word and required another virgin for his appetite. Or worse, the villagers would bring Azure as a voluntary sacrifice in their greed for more, better, bigger. If she did nothing else, she would find a way to protect her sister.

Chapter Five

Thórr watched Azure escape the tiny house through her bedroom window. She was small and frail and sickly. This worried him. How many twins of Delicia's line existed? If Azure was not his mate and did not survive the transition...would his hope for the happiness Alrek had found be lost forever?

He probed Azure's mind and found natural psychic blocks, but soon broke through the walls. She was terrified for her sister Roja, and also for herself. If the village was willing to sacrifice one daughter, why not two?

The energy vibes from the villagers were ugly and evil. He did not like Úlfr's little mountainside town in Mexico. After a century of losing their loved ones to a vampire's appetite to gain favors, they had turned greedy and soulless. He laughed. *Greedy and soulless*. Two qualities he knew too well.

He followed her into the woods, to a small campsite where a woman, probably in her early forties, tended the fire. Azure flung herself at the woman's feet and sobbed.

"It is your birthday too, Azure."

"I don't care about that, Maria. They're taking Roja on the Death Walk soon."

"You knew this day would come."

"You left because you hate what they've become, what they do to keep their lives and their possessions."

The woman cupped Azure's face and kissed her.

Thórr's stomach contracted in shock and in desire. He watched, his breath stalled, as the older woman undressed Azure and kissed her young breasts. Her hands stroked the cinnamon skin, dipping between the thighs to slide into Azure's sweet pussy.

Azure helped Maria undress and greedily sucked the puckering nipples on the still-firm breasts. Maria's eyes drifted shut as Azure worshipped those breasts with more eagerness than skill. Azure dropped to her knees, kissing the slightly rounded stomach and each hip, before licking the pussy slit and suckling the tender flesh.

Thórr's hard-on twitched.

"Come out," demanded Maria. "I know you watch."

Thórr came out, said a spell-word that disrobed him, and stood before the women naked, his hard cock a jutting promise for pleasure and for pain.

"You are like the Dark One." Maria's gaze assessed him. "Do you take us both?"

"Pleasure me well, Healer, and Azure will live."

"It is the nature of your curse to kill."

"You understand then."

The Healer nodded, resignation and heat in her eyes. She sacrificed herself to save the girl. Azure stared at him, fascinated and fearful, not realizing the price her female lover had just agreed to pay to save her life.

"No man has penetrated her."

Thórr nodded, walking toward them. "Azure. Take Maria's nipple into your mouth. Suck it."

Azure's gaze widened and he smiled when he sensed the desire coiling in her belly. She bent and suckled Maria's nipple. The older woman groaned, her hands diving into Azure's thick hair. "The other one," she breathed. "Take the other one."

Azure obeyed.

Thórr stood behind the young woman and pressed his cock against her buttocks. He slid his hands down her stomach to her small hips then up again to cup her breasts. They fit perfectly in his hands. He pinched the hardening nipples, reveling in her gasps and moans. She kissed her way up Maria's chest to her neck then kissed her, pressing her body into Maria's.

Thórr pulled her away.

One spell-word and a huge four-poster bed appeared in the clearing. Azure and Maria stared at him then at the bed with wide eyes and open mouths. Another spell-word and the three of them appeared on it, with Thórr in the middle and each woman on either side.

Azure, obviously more versed in pleasuring a woman than a man, simply stroked his chest with nervous fingers. Maria crawled between his legs and took his cock into her mouth. Her experienced tongue brought him pleasure. She kissed and licked his balls, her tongue trailing a wet path from the base of his cock to the tip, which she slid between her lips and sucked.

“Azure, sit above my face and lower your pussy to me.”

She did as he asked, without question, though her gaze had been fastened on Maria’s pleasuring of his cock with an eagerness that pleased him.

“While I lick your beautiful, juicy cunt, I want you to play with your breasts.”

Her gaze never left his as she slid her hands under her breasts to knead them. Her fingers surrounded her nipples and she pinched them, her moan long and low.

He wanted her to come, and quickly, because Maria’s expert blowjob was driving him into frenzy. Soon, too soon, the haze would overcome him and Maria’s life would be forfeit.

Licking and suckling and trying like hell to hold on to his sanity, he used every trick he’d learned from the very talented Delicia to bring his mate, yes damn it, *his* mate, satisfaction.

“Oh! Oh God!” She rubbed against him, urging on her orgasm. He knew she was close. So close...

Thórr grabbed her thighs and licked her clit, unable to stop the extension of his fangs and the piercing of her flesh. He drank her life-giving blood, suckling her clit with

such force she came, her pussy juice flowing into his mouth with her blood as her scream of release echoed into the endless night.

Thórr licked shut Azure's wounds seconds before she was pulled off by Maria.

"Send her away and do what you must before you kill us both."

"Kill us?" Azure's gaze switched from Thórr to Maria. "No! She is the only one who loves me. You can't—"

"Go, Azure. I choose this."

"No! No!" Azure pulled Maria's arm, unaware her ex-lover was caught up in a sexual fury. It was part of the mental barrage produced by a vampire entering frenzy. Thórr's psychic projections were as uncontrollable as his lust. But he vaguely noted Azure was unaffected by the buzzing mind-energy.

With a spell-word he sent her away, to the church that was his home, locking her into the basement where he lived.

"She is safe?"

He nodded, unable to form words. His entire body throbbed with need, his guts clenched with starvation.

Hungry.

Maria slid onto his cock and started moving, her pussy tight and wet and ready. He was past caring about the woman's pleasure. He wanted, needed, only his own. To fuck and to feed.

Her orgasm clenched his cock, her cries of completion echoing in his mind, the appetizer before the entrée. He lifted her off, turned her around, and, with the last of his willpower, used to a spell-word to coat his cock with lubricant before sliding it inside her anus.

The haze descended. He saw nothing. Heard nothing. Felt nothing but his own bliss crashing through him.

Hungry.

She was on all fours, her head dropped down so that her hair parted and revealed the smooth skin of her neck. The sight of his cock sliding again and again between the round buttocks... Yes! The image was beautiful, intense—damn!—he was already too close because of Azure...

He came, his orgasm rocketing through him, as heavy and hot as the hunger that claimed him. As his seed spilled, he collapsed on top of her and pressed her to the bed. He pierced her neck, drinking her blood as the pleasure continued to roll through him, increasing tenfold as he feasted.

A long moment after Thórr finished, he withdrew from the limp woman and rolled her over. She was pale, her lips dry, the light in her eyes dimming.

"Dying," she whispered.

"I know."

Her mouth curved into a hollow smile. "No. Already dying. Cancer."

Thórr said two spell-words. The first one cleaned her and the second dressed her in a robe of finest blue silk. "I know, Maria."

"Must tell her."

"She won't believe me."

"Loved her."

"She is mine now. I do not share."

"Me either." Her trembling hand rose and touched his cheek. "*Puede adorar ascensor su maldición.*" *May love lift the curse.*

"*Gracias, el Curador. Goce el cielo.*"

"May you enjoy heaven one day, too."

Thórr felt a whisper of regret. Then Maria stilled, her hand dropping to the bed, her unseeing eyes gazing at the starry sky.

* * * * *

The villagers cheered when Roja left the house at dusk. Their lightheartedness belied the clenching of her guts.

I'm going to die this night.

She wanted to weep, to run, to rail against the unfairness. But she did not. She would not smile for them, would not pretend for them, would not, damn it all, allow whatever conscience they had left to be assuaged by the belief she went willingly into the darkness.

With great jubilation, the villagers walked Roja out of town. Laughter, music and impromptu dance surrounded her and she tried to shield herself from it all. She'd come to realize she had extrasensory perception. She knew things about people, about nature, and she had learned, crudely, to block emotions.

Except for tonight. Tonight, she could not draw enough strength to calm the tenseness in her belly or to bat away the empty gladness of her people.

Too quickly, they reached the edge of the path. Just a few feet up, through the dense jungle, was the Dark One's cave. She sensed the villagers' impatience, their eagerness to be rid of her and of the curse. Her mother, her brown eyes alight with nothing more than pity, kissed her brow and turned, walking away with the other villagers to their celebration.

Her bitterness tasted like tears.

Azure, the only person she loved and who loved her, had not garnered enough courage to leave her room and say goodbye. Her sister's last-minute abandonment cut more deeply than the villagers' glee that her death would bring them long lives.

"So, I go the Death Walk alone." She peered into the dark and shuddered. She had no torch or weapon to take with her. No one walked this path with the intention of returning. Why waste a valuable source of light or a good knife on the dead?

With a deep breath, she stepped onto the dirt road. Before she could take another, she appeared in the cave, her body tingling from head to toe.

Fear clawed through her.

What had happened?

How had she'd gotten here without taking the path?

Snap. Pop. Torches in brackets on the dank walls lit themselves. She swallowed the knot in her throat, clutched the edge of her pretty red dress.

"I transported you here, Roja." The Dark One stepped from the shadows, his gaze opaque and emotionless as he stared at her. "I always thought that the whole Death Walk was melodramatic."

"I was too young to help my father take the walk." Her voice was a frightened whisper. She touched her throat as if the gesture would transfer strength there.

"He was a good man, your father. We had a nice, long talk before—"

"You killed him."

"Ended his misery. He was very ill."

"But I am not. Yet you would murder his daughter."

"Would I?" He drew close to her and grasped her chin with gentle fingers. "Would I destroy such beauty with my appetite? Drink your life essence until you were no more than a shell?"

Her heart tripled its beat, pounding so loud and so fierce, she swore the demon holding her with the mere touch of two fingers heard it. His obsidian gaze fell to her chest, to the rapid rise and fall of her breasts as she tried to get a handle on the terror threatening to overwhelm her.

"I have a request, Dark One."

"Every sacrifice usually does." He let his hand drop away.

"My sister, Azure...I ask for her protection. Take her from the village, put her someplace safe."

His lips lifted into a secretive smile. "Ah yes, Azure. Consider it done."

She lowered her gaze, wondering when he would strike, when he would take her virginity and her life. She trembled, tears gathering in her eyes, while she stood and waited.

Wind whipped into the cave and doused the torches. In the dark, the whisper of voices, the strokes of hands, the wetness of lips surrounded her. Desire made her nipples pucker, made her pussy slick and needy. The fear slithered away and new sensations overpowered all other emotions. She ached so much for something unknown, her hand slid between her thighs and cupped her womanhood.

'You are mine.'

Startled, she stared at him.

'I can put my thoughts into your mind. And you can do the same in mine. Do you understand?'

"Yes."

'Use your thoughts.'

'Yes, Dark One.'

'Oh for heaven's sake. More driveling nonsense from those idiotic villagers! My name is Úlfr.'

'Úlfr.'

'You will stay here until I return.'

The darkness disappeared, and again, her body experienced the same strange tingling sensation as before. Roja found herself not in the small dark cave, but in a huge well-lit cavern with all the luxurious necessities of a wealthy home.

Her gasp echoed off the walls.

"Where are you?"

'Nearby. Enjoy yourself while I'm gone. Everything you see is yours. Do as you wish.'

"But what about—"

'Sacrifice? In due time, beloved.'

She knew the moment he left her mind. It was as if one moment he had stood next to her and the next, he had walked out of the room. She sucked in a deep breath, trying to take in everything. In one corner, she saw a huge four-poster bed with endless white silk pillows. The bedding looked as soft as a cloud. A few feet from the bed sat the biggest television she'd ever seen and she'd only had the pleasure of seeing one, long ago, when her family had traveled to one of the large cities to see the doctors.

Turning, she saw a huge kitchen with a big silver refrigerator and matching stove, microwave, and other gadgets. Opposite from the bedroom area was a mammoth green couch and another huge television. She walked to a tall stand next to it and saw at least a hundred DVDs and CDs tucked inside the slots. How she wished Azure were here to see this! They had perused out-of-date catalogs and made wish lists. They hadn't ever seen a movie or used a microwave. How did the creature get the necessary electricity into the cavern to use these things?

'Who cares, Roja! They work, and for now, they are yours!'

It was as if the Dark One had taken her to her own personal heaven, allowing her a beautiful respite until it was time to fulfill her vow to him. She twirled in a circle and laughed. Even if this reprieve did not last long, she would make the most of it.

"Thank you, Úlfr!" she called out. "Thank you!"

A mile away in the little cave where he still stood, Úlfr smiled.

Chapter Six

In the old church's basement, Azure sat on the gritty concrete stairs and grieved. Still naked, still in shock, she wept. Tears splashed her legs, an endless sorrow lodged in her chest and a growing knot of hatred filled her gut.

The monster had taken Maria.

What would be her fate, if that of her only lover was death? Had this...this *creature* locked her away to savor her as some sort of awful dessert?

Everyone who loved her was gone. Roja, Maria...oh God, the list was too short. She hadn't told Ro goodbye. Her sister had taken the Death Walk alone. *She thinks I abandoned her.*

Another wave of grief enveloped her.

'Ssshhh, Little One.'

"Who is that?" She rose from the stairs, stumbling to the dusty floor below. Her heart pounded fiercely as cold fear wound its way up her spine. She spun around, looking for the source of the voice. She saw only the twin bed, the small refrigerator, the shelves overflowing with books. On a table by the bed was the only source of light, a big square lamp.

She was alone in the room. But not in her head. The monster had found a way to get inside her skull.

'Please believe me, Azure, when I tell you Maria no longer suffers. Some day, I will take you to her grave.'

"You killed her!"

'She was dying, beloved. She had brain cancer.'

"No! You are lying to me." She fell to her knees, weeping and wailing. "Come to me, monster. Come to me and kill me too, for you have already ripped out my heart."

'Please, Azure.' Desperation tinged the words. *'You are my mate. We are bound.'*

"I would rather die than spend my life with you."

'I hope that is not true. I have waited more than a thousand years for you, but I will wait a little while longer.'

"You would leave me in this hovel to rot? I would go insane wondering if this day or the next is when you come to claim me."

'I honor you, Azure. Time will be my gift to you. But you are mine and no other's.'

"Then you steal, oh honorable one. I will never give you anything other than my hatred."

'Time, Azure. Some time. But not forever.'

* * * * *

One month later...

'I will take you.'

'Again? You are ravenous, my lover.'

Roja arched against the fingers stroking her flesh, offering her breasts to the mouth of the man with auburn hair and hazel eyes. He was strong and beautiful and had infiltrated her dreams on the night she was to be the Dark One's sacrifice. Every night for the last seven days, he had waited for her to fall asleep. He seduced her with pretty words and tender touches and made her wish he had been her reality. But no, he was only her dream lover.

His cock nestled against the soft core of her womanhood. Her clit was swollen and ripe and the mere touch of his manhood against it brought tingling pleasure. The first night he had made love to her, he'd shown her the ways of pleasure. And in dreams, a virgin felt no pain, no awkwardness, no shyness.

'I want you inside me,' she whispered, her hands coasting to his buttocks. She cupped his ass, dragging her nails across the flesh. He shuddered, his cock twitching between her pussy lips.

'You are insatiable.' He kissed the side of her neck, nibbling down to her collarbone. 'I love your breasts.'

'They are too small.'

'They are perfect.' His kissed the areolas, his tongue making wet circles around her nipples. He took one turgid peak into his mouth then the other. She squirmed at the sensations rippling through her.

'¡Tómeme, por favor!' She bucked against him, wanting to feel his cock inside her, wanting to know the same bliss he had shown her the nights before.

He laughed and played with her nipples, refusing her demands. 'La paciencia, amado. La paciencia.'

'Patience?' She pushed on his shoulders until he rolled over, and climbed on top of him. His hard length slid inside her wet, ready pussy, and she shuddered. She moved, more eager than experienced, but his eyes drifted closed all the same. She felt the trembling muscles of his stomach as he tried to control his own desire. Oh, he made her feel powerful and beautiful and feminine. His hands cupped her breasts, pulling and gently twisting the nipples. He knew her weakness all too well. Her breasts were sensitive, the turgid peaks especially, and she found that she loved his mouth and fingers playing with them.

She slid up and down his cock, riding him hard, moaning as he twisted her nipples harder, harder...oh yes. The joy she'd come to know from making love spiraled inside her, a tight winding of sensation that threatened to overwhelm her. Then her lover tucked a nipple into his mouth and bit the tender flesh.

Roja screamed as the orgasm burst, and wave after wave of bliss lapped at her. His cock slipped out of her pulsating vagina, and she rubbed her slick cunt on his stomach. Her lover released the throbbing, tingling nipple, grabbed her hips, and guided her pussy to his mouth.

'No,' she protested. Her clit was too sensitive to survive another assault. 'Please.'

He stroked the nub with his tongue, rapid, short moves that made her squirm. She moved against his mouth, her thighs quaking as she sought another impossible release. Her hands cupped her own breasts, kneaded them, then she pulled at the nipples and came again, nearly falling forward as her lover drank from her.

When Roja opened her eyes, she found Úlfr standing next to the bed. Fear formed a cold knot in her chest. He looked... *Madre de Dios*...the only word worthy was *hungry*. No, ravenous. His eyes were black as river rocks, his hands clenched into fists, and his lips curled back into a dangerous sneer. His fangs gleamed whitely against the plump red of his lower lip.

"It is my time?" she asked in a whisper.

"Have I not given you a month of leisure? And a week of preparation?"

She wanted to slip beneath the covers and hide her sweaty, naked body, still replete from the satisfaction received from her dream. Then Úlfr's words sank in. A week of preparation?

"You...that was *you*?"

"Yes, *mi corazón*. I wanted you to know how wonderful sex could be with the right person. With the only person you'll ever have."

"Then, you will have me...and I will—" Roja swallowed a sob. How could she have settled into such a comfortable life? Why had she not tried to find an escape or mentally beg for his clemency?

Dressed head to toe in black—the silk shirt, the dress pants, the wing-tipped shoes—he looked like Satan come to claim his bride. Her heart pounded in her chest, a mixture of fear and desire. Úlfr had been her dream lover. He had been gentle and kind and giving. A true monster would have ravished her in the cave. An evil being would have sucked away her life force without regret, leaving her human shell to wither into dust.

But though Úlfr had the power and strength to take her, to force himself upon her, to rip apart her flesh, he had not. He hesitated like a little boy contemplating the cooling

pie on the windowsill. Tempted, but afraid. Yes, he did seem desperate to have a taste of her, but fearful of reprisal. What could she say or do that made *him* tremble?

"Damn it." With one last look of regret, he turned away and disappeared, leaving only gold and black sparkles in his wake.

* * * * *

"I think you should date her."

Úlfr looked at Charron in disbelief. "I have entered her dreams and made love to her. I cannot give her roses and a meal and hope she will love me enough to possibly sacrifice her life to see if she can save mine."

"Have you asked her?"

"On a date?"

"To make love and see if her life will save yours."

"No!" Úlfr looked out the window near the small table. He had barely touched the special tea Charron had brewed for him. Alrek was out, *buying groceries* of all things, and so he found himself seeking the counsel of his friend's wise and charming wife.

"Where would I take her, Charron? Where can I go that would not draw attention?"

"You mean where can you go that would give Roja no chance to escape?"

If it was possible, and it wasn't, Úlfr would feel sheepish at Charron's on-target remark. As much as he wanted Roja to want him and what they could have together, he could not relinquish his control of her.

"Úlfr, I think you must do what you fear the most—let her go."

"*What?*"

"Let her go, my dear friend. See what happens."

Úlfr sighed. "She's my final sacrifice. I sorta wanted to keep her."

Laughing, Charron reached across the table and grasped his hand. "Love is sacrifice."

“Love? You think I love her? That’s impossible. I don’t feel emotions.”

“That’s a bunch of hooey. Male justification for fucking around all these years. Set your woman loose, Úlfr. She may surprise you.”

* * * * *

Azure stared at the fine cracks in the adobe wall, mapping them one by one.

Her teeth chattered, her clothing was torn, and her body was dirty and rank from refusing to bathe. She ignored the beautiful tub with its magical endless supply of hot water. She refused the warm blankets and soft pillows offered by her monstrous keeper. For a month he had kept her in this room. *This awful, terrible room.*

He had filled it with books, with food, with entertainment such as a television and a CD player. She cared nothing for these baubles, these gifts, these bribes. All she thought about was Maria. Her precious, beautiful Maria killed by the creature who wanted her flesh. And her sister Roja taken by the other Dark One. She had no one now. No mother, no sister, no lover.

He wants my flesh.

Her skin crawled with worms of disgust. The idea Thórr might one day try to claim her made her nauseous. She would not submit to him again.

He wants my flesh.

To eat away her muscles, gnaw on her bones, drink her blood like a good wine. He wanted to inhale her inch by inch until she didn’t exist.

He wants my flesh.

Rocking back and forth, her bruised skin scraping on the rough concrete floor, Azure stared at the fine cracks in the adobe wall, mapping them one by one.

* * * * *

“I don’t understand.” Roja stared at the thick roll of one-hundred-dollar bills in her hand. She looked at Úlfr, who stood five feet away watching her with the same little-

boy-wants-a-pie gaze she'd noticed on his last visit. "You're giving me money and setting me free?"

Perversely, Roja felt as if she had somehow failed him. Should she not take this bid at freedom? She could find Azure and together they could make a new life. And yet, she felt as though she should stay. She had wondered, many times since she found out Úlfr was her dream lover, what it would be like to make love to Úlfr for real.

"If it pleases you, may I call upon you, Roja?"

"Call upon me?"

He looked away, clearing his throat. When he looked at her again, she swore there was a hint of red in his pale cheeks. "I would like to take you out."

"Of the cave?"

"No. Yes. *Shit*. As in, take you to dinner."

"Dinner." He wanted her for dinner?

"I'd like you for dessert, actually." He grinned boyishly. "What I'm trying to ask is if you will do me the honor of going out with me—to dinner, well, for you at any rate. Perhaps a movie too?"

Roja sank onto the four-poster bed, the wad of one-hundred-dollar bills as heavy as stone in her hand. The Dark One was asking her on a date. The monster of her village who had for as long as anyone could remember traded human lives for her peoples' prosperity and wellbeing...wanted to *date* her.

"I am very confused," she said.

Úlfr sat next to her, his muscled thigh warm against hers. "I might as well lay it all out, Roja. A thousand years ago, a witch of a dying race cursed me and two other men I considered my brothers. We have wandered this earth alone, seeking only what satisfied our needs. And make no mistake, *mi corazón*, my needs are for sex and for blood."

Roja shuddered, though the fear was edged with excitement. She remembered too well how Úlfr's body felt on hers, the ways his smooth, strong hands stroked her flesh, the way his manhood pierced her with its long, rough strokes.

"Er...you might want to not think about that," said Úlfr. "You're not using your mind blocks and I can hear what you're thinking."

"Mind blocks?"

"You're psychic. You can shield your thoughts from me by imagining a very strong wall. Oh hell. I probably shouldn't tell you that."

"I do not need a wall," she said. "Tell me more of your story."

"We found out that if we mate with a certain kind of female—the short version is simply a twin with psychic abilities—we might be able to end the curse and regain our mortality."

Roja looked at the money clutched in her fist. Freedom. From Úlfr, from the village, from the life she hated so much. Then she glanced at Úlfr. In his eyes she saw the faint hope, the tinge of desperation. How lonely he must've been all these years, how horribly trapped in a life without end, a life only maintained because of violence and death.

He was the monster, but he had been the one to show her true kindness. The villagers sang and danced for her death, caring nothing for her fears, caring nothing for her life. And Úlfr, the creature who might have killed her and left her bones to rot in that tiny cave, gave her a month of leisure, a week of love.

Now she found herself gifted with the freedom she had wanted more than anything just a few weeks ago. Yes. Freedom.

Or sacrifice.

"You think I can save you?" she asked.

"I don't know. I suspect you might be my lifemate. But the only way to know is to make love to you...and not kill you in the process."

"I chose to be your sacrifice once before. And I choose to be again."

Úlfr stared at the defiant young beauty. "You don't owe me your life."

"Oh? So I should take your money and run away? Do you think your lifemate has so little courage?"

His heart thumped fiercely. *His lifemate*. Was it true? Was she his eternally? Roja was stubborn. He knew this about her, from the first second he'd seen her as a sixteen-year-old girl standing in his cave lying about her age, bluffing so that her twin might live. Úlfr had watched her take care of her living space, wrestling with dust, shooining away bats, forcing the DVD player to do her bidding.

"I think I may love you," he said quietly. "I do not know how love feels, not really. Not even when I was a mortal man could I claim to know that emotion. What if I am wrong, Roja? I cannot bear the thought of harming you. I don't deserve you. I've done too many terrible things to warrant compassion or redemption."

"What do you want, Úlfr? Forgiveness? A clean slate? The past cannot be wiped away. You can only live one day at a time. If today you are good man, then that is who you are."

He laughed, nonplussed by her simple logic. "You truly believe that?"

"Yes. And I'm right." She sniffed, pretending hurt. "I have lived only eighteen years and you a thousand and still I know more than you do."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, *really*."

To his delight, she tossed the money to the floor and dove onto him, knocking him flat against the bed.

"Make love to me, Úlfr," she murmured against his chest.

With one spell-word, he shed their clothing. Her naked flesh rubbed against his and caused desire to stir wildly—like the whipping wind of a tornado. He rolled her onto her back and kissed her softly, lightly. He wanted to devour her, but not in the heat and

fury he knew as a cursed immortal. No, he wanted a slow feasting of Roja, to taste her inch by inch and show her the real meaning of pleasure.

But his Roja was neither patient nor tender. She did not appreciate his attempts at gentle ravishing. Her hands and mouth were everywhere, kissing, nipping, grasping, clawing...a frenzy of need, of want. His teeth elongated, and the familiar haze descended, fogging his mind.

Hungry.

Somehow, Roja managed to roll him to his back. She was everywhere, a tiny brown demon with her lips on his inner thighs, her hands prayerfully cupping his balls. He felt the nip of teeth on his cock, the long wet heat of her tongue swirling up...then she suckled the tip, drawing the seed pearled there into her mouth and savoring it with a long sigh of joy.

She worshipped him with mouth and tongue, her hand wrapped around the base of his cock stroking, stroking, stroking as she sucked him. The haze of beastly need that meant only the death of his prey drifted away. It was as if Roja had taken on the frenzy and he became the victim of *her* need. She was ravenous, eager, demanding. Before he could do more than moan her name, she slid onto his cock, and pierced her virgin flesh.

Tight. She was so fucking tight. He grabbed her hips and held on, feeling every inch of slick flesh as she lowered herself slowly, until he was sheathed fully inside her. She stilled, panting like a marathon runner, and stared at him with an odd look in her eyes.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

"Help me," she said. "It's different from the dream. I don't know what to do."

"I can't—just—oh God. Roja, stop that. You're in pain...right?"

She continued clutching his penis with her vaginal muscles, a little arrogant smile flitting across her lips. Placing her hands on his chest, she moved awkwardly forward. The release of his cock and the slow, sliding return brought him shuddering pleasure. She did it again. And again. And again.

“Damn it, vampire!” She smacked his chest with a fist. “Úlfr! I want to do it better. Help me!”

Chapter Seven

In less time than it took for her to blink, he yanked her off and planted her face-first into the bed. Her ass begged to be taken, and one day soon he would show her the pleasures of anal sex, but for now...that beautiful pussy needed attention. With only a twinge of regret, he flipped her onto her back, pulled her legs against his chest, and entered her with as much gentleness as he was capable of. Her brown eyes glittered as she watched him, then she cupped her own breasts and played with the taut little nipples.

"Yes. Like that," he said approvingly. "And I'll do this."

His thumb parted the slick folds of her vulva and pushed against the clit. She jolted. "Again," she said. "Again, my vampire."

Watching his woman pleasure her own breasts while begging him for release...watching his cock pierce her virgin flesh while his thumb stroked her to orgasm...the haze returned with a vengeance. He smelled her sex, the creamy desire as she urged him on, offering herself without fear.

Úlfr lost his mind.

She came, a silent scream lodged in her throat as she clutched the covers, and writhed. Her strong pulsations milked him and with a hoarse cry, he came too, spilling his seed as his orgasm roared through him. Then, he pushed down her legs and collapsed on top of her, his cock still embedded inside her.

Hungry.

He smelled the blood pulsing through her veins, heard the echo of her thoughts as she wondered what was next, and felt his hard-on slicked with the evidence of their orgasms.

He knew he had to fuck her again...*now*...just as he knew he must...do...this...

His teeth pierced the smooth flesh of her neck and the heavenly, warm blood spilled into his mouth. The last thing he heard before his hunger overwhelmed his senses was Roja's terrified scream.

* * * * *

Three months later...

"You could've warned me," said Roja as she recounted the tale to Charron. The two couples sat at the tea table in Alrek's warehouse home, sharing a quiet afternoon together.

Roja looked at Úlfr, her lips in a pout she knew he found adorable. The funny wriggle in his gut, the anxiety he felt when she was not with him, the annoyance that flared when she insisted on doing things her way—he knew now, these were the symptoms of love. Love was confusing. It was wonderful and terrible. Yet he wouldn't give up his love for Roja for another thousand years of immortality. They were lifemates.

"You tasted good," he finally said. "And once you recovered from the experience I recall that you liked it very much and begged for more."

"True." She placed her hand against his cheek. "Oh, does my vampire not have the most beautiful hazel eyes?"

Charron and Alrek shared an odd look. Úlfr had noticed a glow about Charron when they arrived for a late lunch. And Alrek looked as if he was bursting to tell a long-kept secret.

"Are you going to tell us?" he asked. "Or should we guess?"

"We're pregnant," Alrek said.

"So, you will carry the baby half the time?" asked Roja with an arched brow.

"He can have the second half, that's the heaviest part," said Charron.

Alrek had the grace to look sheepish. But Úlfr knew the true meaning of such an event. "The tattoo? The curse?"

Unbuttoning his shirt, Alrek revealed the smooth flesh of his shoulder. No mark of Jantra's curse existed.

"You are human."

"Yes. No more magic or bending humans to my will."

"He tried an evil stare and creepy demand at Babies R Us and the clerk suggested we shop for cribs somewhere else."

"Har, har." Alrek chuckled her on the chin then bent to kiss the same spot. "Charron and I still share our psychic bond, but other than that—I am mortal."

"Then it will be the same for me." Úlfr grinned at Roja and waggled his brows. "We'll have fun trying to make babies."

Roja swatted him on the arm but he knew her thoughts. She wanted to please him, but she also wanted to live a little before settling down to parenthood. He would take her to see the world, he would show her everything, and they would be happy together.

"What of Thórr and Azure?" asked Charron.

Roja shook her head, and Úlfr clasped her hand and squeezed. "He took her to the mountains near the village, but she refuses to eat or to talk."

"She is a ghost," said Roja. "She won't acknowledge me at all. She talks on and on about Maria. I fear my sister is dead to me..." She sighed. "He wants to fix her, he wants to love her. He will not see that she is not for him. Poor Thórr."

As if his name conjured his presence, the vampire appeared. He looked exhausted, thin and pale. His blond hair was listless and greasy, his clothes hung so loosely he looked like a bedraggled scarecrow.

"Thórr," said Charron, the shock in her voice speaking for all of them. "My God! Are you okay?"

"I thought you should know," he said, the faint sound of tears edging his words, "that Azure threw herself off a cliff this morning. I could not reach her in time and I could not revive her. She looked like a broken china doll. I—I buried her next to Maria." He looked at Roja, his face an emotionless mask. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"And I for yours," she said. "I grieved for her long ago, my friend. You must do the same."

"She was my lifemate. And now, I have no one to claim. No one to save me. No one to love."

Without another word, Thórr disappeared, the last of three cursed brethren, the only one truly without hope. How could the only one of them to never give up searching for a cure, to never stop communing with God, to never give in to despondency...how could he be left in despair, without faith?

"Where will he go?" asked Roja. "We must find him."

"No," said Úlfr. "We must give him some time alone. Then we will find and help him."

"Whether he wants it or not," promised Alrek.

Charron took Roja's free hand across the table and gripped it. "We'll go to the gravesite and tell her our goodbyes."

"Thank you."

Úlfr silently blessed Charron's kindness. Roja had accepted that Azure was lost to her, but he knew she still grieved for her twin.

Roja shared childhood stories about Azure and soon they were laughing and talking, paying homage to the young woman who chose suicide over loving a vampire.

Later, they fell into conversation about babies, sleepless nights, and whether or not boys were easier than girls. Úlfr wanted a long life and children with Roja, and he rejoiced that soon he too would be human and would have a chance at a normal, mortal life.

They were almost a village again.

Almost.

Thórr

Chapter Eight

Crap-on-a-cracker. I'm screwed. Mia Simon looked at the metal spike poking out of her stomach. Probably one of those rusty bars that had fallen off the dilapidated wrought iron fence.

Nearing midnight, with a sliver of moon and a failing flashlight to guide her through the old, ruined cemetery, she'd tripped and fallen backwards onto the pike. Scuttling and wiggling like an overturned roach had not helped. All she got for her effort was the moss she knocked off a nearby tombstone...into her mouth.

"Aw, damn." The gravel digging into her backside was far more uncomfortable than the rod that had ripped through vital organs. Didn't it just figure she'd end her days in the most embarrassing way possible?

She spent the next few seconds spitting out moss and thinking about her twin sister Carla, rest her soul, and how she would laugh her ass off. "You died how?" she'd say. "Sweetie, I love ya, but you are an uber klutz."

"What the hell are you doing?"

Mia blinked up at the pissed-off male hovering over her. She hadn't heard footsteps or curses as shins met the crowded grave markers. She'd made enough noise scrambling through the cemetery to wake the dead. Huh. Maybe this guy was the dead. His gaze was completely black. Yikies! Those eyes were creepy.

"Gee, thanks. It's always endearing to be thought of as creepy," he said, looking her over. "Does that hurt?"

"Not really. I was hoping, you know, that when I bit the big one, it would quick and painless." She contemplated her wound. Her favorite red T-shirt was ruined, but on the up side, you couldn't really see the blood spatter. Damn it! Her very cool and expensive black leather jacket – shredded.

"You're worried about clothing? You have bigger problems."

"No shit. FYI, nearly dead women don't like vamps reading their minds." She sighed. Fuck. *That* hurt. A lot. "Not that it's going to matter now, but I guess you're Thórr."

His brows rose. He was pale and the slackness of his face suggested recent weight loss. He had nice blond hair, a little long and shaggy, but in an Ashton Kutcher kind of way. His black T-shirt hugged a muscled chest and his black jeans clung to lean thighs. Her gaze drifted to his feet. They were bare and clean. Was it just the weirdness of her dying thoughts or did his toenails look like they had a pedicure?

"Do you want my help or not?"

Sheesh. He sounded impatient. Like she could control how long it would take for her to die from such a ghastly fate. Hah. "Oh sure. You get a meal and I get dead."

"Or Option B, I help you and heal your wound."

"And make me one of the undead? No thanks."

"FYI," he mimicked, "vampires don't make other vampires."

"Someone made you."

"It involved much more than a neck nibble and an orgasm."

Before she could draw another breath, Thórr bent down and scooped her up. He did it so fast the pain didn't reach her bruised body for a full ten seconds. "Fuck! That fucking hurts you fucking fucker!"

Then she passed out.

* * * * *

In the church's basement, in the luxurious four-poster bed Azure had refused to lie in, Thórr carefully packed Mia's wound with the herb poultice. She slept deeply, thanks to his mental commands. With each ritual gesture, he uttered the necessary spell-words. He had never understood why his kind could conjure objects and zap from place to place, but could not heal injuries—or bring back the dead.

As he finished the elaborate healing ceremony, thoughts of Azure intruded. His only hope for finding the same happiness experienced by his brothers had died with her. How was he to ever find another twin born of Delicia's line? Alrek was mortal and Úlfr transitioning to human. They would wither into old age and die...and he would roam the earth alone.

Unless he too found a way to die.

Starving himself was not working. He had not killed or had sex or drank blood for three months, not since Azure took her own life rather than be his mate. By killing her female lover, he had unknowingly put a dagger in her soul. She abhorred him. Her mind remained a haze of jumbled memories, unspeakable terror, and the ever-present hatred.

Azure. I would have loved you for all time, if only...

If only...what? He had wanted a connection to Azure so badly he had refused to accept that she might not be the one for him. After she flung herself off the cliff near their mountain retreat, he could not fathom life without her. Or rather, life without his mate. And yet...had Azure been his mate?

No, he could not listen to the reasoning of Alrek and Úlfr or the sympathetic speeches of Roja and Charron. What did they know? They had each other. And in five months, Alrek would again have a child. A family.

Rage and despair hummed through him like an electrified wire.

Where is your faith now, holy man?

Thórr's gaze traveled along Mia's naked body. He had rid her of the stained, ripped clothes. Later, he would conjure her more, including another black jacket similar to the one she liked so much.

Jantra's sons! She was beautiful, his unwanted visitor.

Not even the gash in her stomach could mar the true perfection of her form. She was curvaceous and tall and strong. Her breasts were large, the oversized areolas the color of brown sugar. The nipples, hard from the chilled air in the room, were big. He

was surprised at how much he wanted to taste her breasts, at how much he wanted to suck those big nipples until she moaned and writhed underneath him.

With one finger, he encircled her pierced navel and touched the tiny gold hoop. It matched the gold hoops in her earlobes. He traced a line to her left hip, drawing zigzags to her right hip. The neatly trimmed pussy bore proof Mia Simon was a true redhead. Ah. How easy it would be to part those curls and delve inside her pussy, how delicious to find the little pearl hidden...

Cock hardening, desire roaring, Thórr backed away from the bed, stood in the shadows, and watched Mia sleep.

Her red hair spilled onto the silk pillow. It glimmered in the low light, a river of fire against a white shore. Light freckles dusted her nose and he knew her eyes were the color of emeralds. She had a luscious mouth—a vision flashed of her going down on his cock.

Shit.

He sucked in a steadying breath and tried to gather his scattered thoughts. She knew him. She had come for him. He hadn't tried to dig around in her mind, to find out her purpose, to decide if she should live or die.

Too exhausted.

Too...hungry.

Yes, the hunger stirred. The *need* stirred. The victim had come to him. She knew the danger of seeking him out.

Maybe she wanted him. Wanted to feel him plunder her, to steal from her, to fuck her and drink from her...and all the while, she would beg for more, she would insist he devour her soul.

No. No! He had given her back life. Even now, when he allowed himself to question why he bothered to save this human, he did not know the answer.

"Thórr," she whispered.

Heart pounding, fangs extended, Thórr drew close enough to hear her request. Her eyes did not flutter open, her breathing did not change, her limbs did not move.

Still, she slept.

Yet she seemed aware of him.

He knelt next to the bed, dared to hold her warm hand in his cold one. "I am here."

"Dream," she muttered. "Dream with me."

* * * * *

Thórr followed the elusive Mia down the beach. He felt the soft, gritty sand under his bare feet as he hurried to keep up with the laughing woman just ahead. The sun was setting, the sky a tapestry of rich purple and indigo.

He smelled the rich, fragrant scents of flowers... Honeysuckle? Rose? Jasmine? Other scents intruded – the doughy smells of baked bread and the faint scent of just-picked grapes. It shouldn't be possible to identify those smells...it was as if he had gone...no.

Mia darted to the left, away from the shore. He chased her up the steep path, keeping his gaze on the gauzy white dress she wore. Leaves slapped against his simple, wool garment, tied at the waist by a rope belt.

The village was just as he remembered. Four circular one-room huts, and inside each, the basic implements needed for daily life, including the thick, warm furs used for bedding. In front, there was a fire pit. Embers burned low, the smells of cooked meat still lingering. Jantra chose to stay in her cave at night, though she labored with her daughters during the day and took her evening meal with them.

Mia entered the last hut, his hut, and he followed, heart trilling in his chest like a trapped bird. When he lifted the flap, the sense of coming home overwhelmed him. On the right side of the hut, a makeshift desk held his journal, a crude candle, still lit, and the flowers Delicia always picked and left for him. On the left, furs were piled in a thick, soft heap of warmth. Mia had shed her dress and she stretched out naked the furs, her skin gleaming in the flickering light of the candle.

He ditched his clothes, all the while aware of Mia watching him disrobe, her gaze full of desire. She smiled when she saw his gold cock ring – the only jewelry he ever wore.

'Do you remember the first time you took Aliea and Delicia?'

'This is a dream.'

'Dream? Or memory?'

That day, three men – he and Alrek and Úlfr – stood in this hut and, for the first time, made love to beautiful twin females – Delicia and Aliea.

In seconds, he reached Mia and grabbed her, yanking her from the furs. She wore nothing except a languorous smile and the enticing navel piercing. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pressed against him without the slightest indication she feared his anger.

'Why here?' he asked, his voice harsh. 'You know we fled...'

'Greenland. You must have made the voyage with Leif Erikson to Vinland. And you came back, didn't you?'

'We wanted simple lives of peace...lives without bloodshed.'

'How ironic.'

'Yes.' Thórr knew he gripped her arms too tightly. Anger tightened his chest, constricted his breathing. Her gaze did not reflect an ounce of fear and he did not want to decipher the emotion lighting her eyes. 'The day Jantra demanded her punishment, we fell to our knees and accepted it. We died that day. We became the men we once were, only worse. We could not escape Fate so we embraced the violence, the death, and the pleasure. We had forsaken the Motherland. And still, she gained her revenge.'

Thórr kissed Mia as hard and demanding as she deserved for bringing him back to his home. In a thousand years, he had never returned. He refused to set a foot into northern California. None would believe a Viking had gotten as far as California. Many still debated the idea of Vikings finding the American continent. They had taken their small boat as far inland as possible and traveled overland until they gazed upon the Pacific Ocean. They thought their lives were starting over, that they would find peace. But no, their settlement had been long destroyed,

buried now under seaside towns, lost forever the day their women fell under the swords of the dark-skinned warriors.

Damn Mia! He did not want to relive his mortal life.

When he released her mouth, she was limp and panting against him. He pushed on her shoulders and forced her to her knees. That she obeyed so readily enraged him. What was wrong with her? Tempting him? Tormenting him?

The cherry mouth he had so admired slid onto his cock, bringing heat and pleasure. Her tongue played with his cock ring for long moments...then she sucked on his balls while her fingers stroked his penis. Her tongue swept up his cock and swirled around the sensitive head. She took him all the way to the base, and squeezed his balls as she did it over, and over, and over. The thick scent of sex competed with the fragrant blossoms of jasmine that had been left on the desk. He felt an orgasm shift, rise. He couldn't believe he was ready to come.

What are you doing to me, Mia?

He stumbled back, away from her talented mouth. 'Bend over. Give me your ass.'

She did as requested. Turning, she bent at the waist, her fingers wrapping around her ankles, and offered him the pale round flesh of her buttocks. He swallowed the knot in his throat. He didn't understand her. Why she was so willing? Why didn't she sense his anger...his despair?

Sweat beaded Mia's skin. Her ass was damned near perfect. Fuck. She was perfect. Thórr positioned himself behind her and held onto her hips. The tip of his penis touched the puckered star of her anus. Shuddering with terrible, aching need, he inserted the tip of his cock. With a few quick strokes of his hand, the orgasm that threatened seconds ago, spilled over, into Mia. As his seed pulsed into her taut anal opening, he slid further inside, aided by the natural lubrication. When he was sheathed completely, he relished the tight, warm feel, sucking in harsh breaths, trying to regain control.

He wanted to punish her, to fuck her until she repented for the sin of making him remember his mortality. Then she clenched around his penis and he cried out, demanding she do it again. She did. Holding onto her hips, he plunged inside her virgin ass, taking his pleasure with her the way he had taken his pleasure with so many other women.

'I'm not just any woman,' Mia said, her voice soft with desire, with understanding.

So, she shared his thoughts. He did not want to hear her words. He was not ready to forgive her for taking him to this place, for stealing from his memories, for making him remember how much he had missed his village.

'Fuck me harder, vampire,' she said. 'Go on. That's what you want, isn't it? To punish me? Then do it, my darling. Punish me.'

Her words compelled him. He fucked her harder and faster until he gasped with the effort. Sweat rolled down his back as he slammed into her, the slap of his hips against her flesh an erotic music. He watched his penis, constricted at the base by the gold ring, enter and exit Mia's beautiful ass. Oh the gods!

The orgasm burst, a nearly intolerable sensation of bliss that paralyzed him. After a long moment, he wrapped his arm around Mia's stomach and helped her to straighten. His cock was still embedded in her luscious ass, still pulsing with the strength of his unbelievable release.

'You are not just any woman,' he said, grudgingly.

'True,' Mia said. 'I am your lifemate.'

Chapter Nine

Mia awoke to find Thórr between her legs examining her pussy like it was a Godiva chocolate. "I'm not sure I like ass fucking," she said. "Not even in a dream."

He looked at her and grimaced. Could it be the red tinge in his face was a...blush?

"No, it's not a blush," he snapped. "Anal sex can be very enjoyable. What I did, you allowed. But I am sorry you did not enjoy it as much as I did. And *you* are not my lifemate."

"Yeah, well, whatever. Hey! You're naked," she said. "I'm naked, too. And I'm not dead."

"You are almost healed. You've been asleep for nearly three days."

"Three days? And you couldn't come back into my dreams and give me some decent sex?"

Thórr bared his teeth, his eyes flashing with both remorse and annoyance. His black gaze was different from the hazel eyes he'd had in the dream. When he realized she was teasing, he relaxed. Carefully she built a mental wall so that he couldn't read her thoughts so easily. No reason to get the poor dear riled. She gazed at him, hungry for his touch, for his words, for his forgiveness. Damn. She shouldn't have forced him to return to the village. She'd guessed how he might feel about that.

Silly, silly vampire. Don't you know I'm in love with you?

"I know a psychic block when I sense one."

He folded his arms and the muscles in his shoulders and arms bunched nicely. Sweet Jesus.

"And I can break through it."

"Go ahead."

With a snarl, he kneeled between her legs and feasted on her pussy. Heat sparked in her belly as Thórr plunged his tongue inside her. Holy shit! This was no gentle loving, no attempt at apology. She tried to scoot away, but his hands wrapped around her legs and held her in place.

“Thórr —”

“*What?*”

The violence of his tone should’ve frightened her, but since she knew the source of his anger, she only felt mildly annoyed. Her view of him was the top of his blond head and the occasional glimpse of his face as he nuzzled the inside of her thighs. She fell against the pillows, her hands fisting in the covers, and enjoyed the agonizing pleasure incurred by Thórr’s mouth.

He tasted every inch of her swollen flesh until she squirmed and begged. He tortured her clit with licks and suckles, refusing to release her from the sensuous torment. He tried to devour her, damn it, and she loved it.

When he finally took her clit between his lips, the orgasm threatened. She felt a double sting, then she was coming, blind with intensity of it, rising, cresting, falling...and as her juices flowed so did her blood.

* * * * *

“Why don’t you tell me how you know about me and where I’m from, what the shit you were doing in the cemetery, and why the holy hell you think you’re my lifemate?”

Mia, feeling lazy from either the amazing orgasm or the loss of blood, raised one hand and ticked off on her fingers. “One. Delicia’s diary. Two. Trying to find you. Three. My sister told me.”

Thórr blinked at her. “Huh?”

“Tonight is the new moon, isn’t it?”

Thórr’s brows rose. “Let’s get back to Delicia’s diary. How could you possibly read it? The language of her people is dead. Not even I can remember how to speak it, much

less write it. She and Aliea and Jantra were the very last of their kind." He paused, sat up, and more muscle bunching occurred. Damn, he was yummy. His cock was hard, and it was big. God, she couldn't wait to *really* get her mouth on it.

"Mia?"

She blinked, dragging her gaze away from his impressive penis. "You're wondering how I know about Jantra and her daughters."

He waited, his gaze revealing more than just curiosity. He was still riled. *Aw, crud.*

"She was taken by the Yuki. From my research, I found out they were one of the first people to settle the area and they were one of the few Northern Californian tribes that attacked others. They knew Jantra and the girls had settled near the beach and because they were only women, they ignored them."

"Then we arrived."

"Warriors know warriors."

"We'd been there for almost two years. Why wait so long if they thought us a threat?"

"Delicia either didn't know or didn't include it." Mia folded her hands across her stomach. No scar. No evidence, other than a little soreness, that her flesh and organs had been spiked with a rusty implement. *Kewl.* "Her diary was written in Latin."

"Latin." Thórr looked surprised – no, shocked. Immediately, she understood why.

"Did you really think them primitive?"

"No. I'm just stunned *you* can read Latin."

"I can also read Greek, speak French and Spanish, and I know enough karate to kick your sorry ass."

"I'm really scared." He muttered some unrecognizable phrases and she found herself wrapped in comfy jeans, a red T-shirt, red socks, and a really nice pair of white Skechers. He even remembered to conjure a black jacket that was better than her other one. Sweet!

"I guess this means I'm not getting more nookie." She looked at him and batted her eyelashes.

"Be careful what you wish for."

Her heart stuttered. *Oh baby, you have no idea what I'm wishing for.* Slowly, she sat, and other than a muscle twinge or two in her abs, she managed to do just fine. She noted he too was dressed – the ol' black badass vampire look he seemed to favor.

He stared at her and she stared back, brows raised.

"They never told us where they were from. Truth be told, we knew very little about them." He sat next to her, his gaze on her face. His face was a pale, emotionless mask, yet she sensed Thórr was not emotionless at all. Cursed or not, the guy was feeling shock and pain. And if the stiffie in his jeans was any indication, he still wanted to fuck her.

At that nice thought, she perked up. Patting his thigh, she rose from the comfy bed. "Let's go, babe."

"We're not going anywhere. You will sit and you will answer my questions."

"Okay." She sat down. "Let me try this vamp attitude for a minute." She leaned close, her lips a breath away from his and whispered, "I want to fuck your vod."

His lips twitched. It wasn't a smile, but it was probably as close to one as Thórr had. "What's a vod?"

"Rod or bod. Interpret it as you wish. I'll return the favor, you know." She slipped her hand between his legs and pressed her palm against his hard-on. She traced the ridge through his jeans and felt his cock jerk at her light touch. "Unfortunately, I don't think we'll have time to make use of this awesome bed."

Was it her imagination or did Thórr look less like an animated statue? Maybe, just maybe, he scooped closer to her, widened his legs a millimeter, let his gaze heat with desire. Thórr put his hand on hers and removed it from his crotch. She sighed. "At least your dick likes me."

"If you know about me and my curse then you know what will happen if I give in to the bloodlust."

"I'll die a happy woman?"

He rolled his eyes. "You are suicidal."

"You can't kill your lifemate."

"You aren't my lifemate. She is dead."

It was her turn to roll her eyes. "Don't you want to know why we can't use this bed and find out how right I am?"

"Does it have something to do with the new moon?"

"The Vamp Vigil is coming today. They want to stake you. They think you're powerless during a new moon."

"They're confusing me with a werewolf."

"Werewolves have problems during full moons. Tonight is a new moon." She rose and held out her hand. "Three days ago, we had a chance to outrun them. Now, we'll be lucky to get out of the cemetery alive."

"You came here to save me." He sounded both suspicious and amazed.

"Too bad she didn't succeed," said a new voice.

Thórr looked at the tall skinny man lounging in the doorway. The hunter was dressed from head to toe in black including the half mask. Who did he think he was? Zorro?

Mia smacked him on the shoulder. "What the hell is wrong with your vamp senses? You couldn't hear these assholes coming down the steps?"

"Who says I didn't?"

"Duh. I do."

Okay, so he hadn't paid much attention to scrabbling noises his sensitive hearing had picked up several minutes ago. Rats and other creatures often roamed the

crumbling church. Mia and her astounding revelations had distracted him so he hadn't realized the scraping sounds were footsteps descending the concrete stairs.

"Mia." The skinny man walked forward until he stood only one foot away from them.

Thórr watched him the same way a cat tracked a scurrying mouse. He sensed triumph, not fear from this idiot. Arrogance tinged his glee, too. Thórr frowned. *Does he not realize I can snap his foolish neck?*

"You betrayed us. I'm disappointed."

"Like I give a shit." Mia tossed her thick red hair behind her shoulder and stood straight, hands on her hips. Thórr was strangely proud of her attitude.

"You stole from us."

"You stole from me first. So fuck you."

"Tsk, ts. We didn't steal your sister's life. Consider her death partial payment."

"Did I mention...fuck you?"

The man laughed, the sound too sinister to be true amusement. "Carla had no problem spending the Vigil's money to do her excavations. Then she finds what we've coveted for a thousand years and cheats us." The man reached out and dared to rub a thumb on Mia's cheek. She jerked away from his touch, but didn't step back, refusing to be cowed.

Thórr felt a dark, unfamiliar welling in his chest that rose violently and knotted in his throat. Vaguely he placed a name to the emotion—*possessiveness*. Whether or not he'd laid claim to Mia was of no consequence. She had claimed him in her own strange, illogical way. That was enough, for now, to issue his protection. A low growl rumbled as his fangs elongated. He stepped between Mia and this hunter. "Touch her again and I'll kill you."

"Oh spare me," said the man. "In case you're wondering, my name is Moran." He tapped his skull. "You can't read my mind, can you?"

"I have no wish to do so," said Thórr. He had sensed the strong psychic block, but hardly cared. He'd come across the rare human with such power a few times in his thousand years on earth. So what? He wanted only to get Mia away from him.

"I want the diary, Mia," said Moran. "And the amulet."

"Nah. I think I'll keep them."

"I trusted you. I should kill you for that betrayal."

"But you need me, don't you? You need the diary and the amulet and me for the spell."

"A twin of Delicia's line." Moran sighed. "What a darling idiot you are. I thought you could read Latin."

Thórr stayed Mia's arm, drawing it across his stomach and holding it tightly until she relaxed.

"Nobody insults my Latin translations!"

She was bold, this one, hiding her fear behind flip words and a brave front. But he heard the pounding of her heart and knew the chaos of her thoughts. Moran terrified her and not only because he had killed her sister. He had power unlike any he'd ever seen, and only one word described Moran—evil. Damn it! Thórr needed to know what she knew, what Carla had told her, what Delicia had written in her diary... He needed to know it all.

"We need a blood taker," said Moran. "The prophecy was that a twin of Delicia's line would lead us to the holy one. And that's Thórr. He's the shaman. The spiritual leader. The priest of the vamps."

'You don't fuck like a priest.'

Thórr snorted at Mia's irreverent telepathic comment. *'I'm no priest. And I have not fucked you, yet.'*

'Promises, promises.'

"I tire of this nonsense," said Thórr. He gathered energy around Moran and imagined the hunter flailing around in the Atlantic Ocean.

Nothing happened.

Moran smiled, crossing his arms and rocking back on his heels. "What's wrong, vampire? Having a problem getting rid of me?"

Thórr tried again to zap Moran someplace unpleasant. And failed. Alarm prickled the hair on the back of his neck. Moran was not a rare human with strong psychic powers. He was the only human capable of defeating a blood taker.

All the talk of diaries and amulets and rituals swirled in Thórr's mind. Jantra had told them about the *Desrai Sa'ed*. Using spell-words, an amulet created from an ancient's blood and a blood taker, a person could not only absorb the vamp's soul energy, but his otherworldly powers. The ritual had been created by enemies of Jantra's people. But those enemies and all from Jantra's line had died. Thórr was made, not born. He and his brothers were cursed by Jantra's blood and magic. They had gained only a fraction of the witch's true powers, which seemed formidable to most humans and yet what they knew was *nothing* compared to what Jantra had been capable of. Yes, this lesson they had learned all too well in those early months of their training.

"You aren't capable of performing the *Desrai Sa'ed*." Thórr kept his grip on Mia's arm, drawing her other one around him as well. Her chin rested on his shoulder, her warm breath tickled his neck.

"Delicia procreated quite a bit. The Yuki traded her to another tribe. She was a slave to that tribe and then another, right on down to Mexico. She found her way into the beds of a few Europeans, too. Amazing, isn't it? Nobody knows how many men fucked her, but we do know she had at least ten children. Six boys and four girls. All twins. And those are only the ones we know about." Moran tilted his head, his lips pursed. "All that tainted blood. But I guess we are all half-breeds, aren't we?"

Thórr tensed. "You are from Delicia's line."

“Bravo, Thórr! Yes, I’m descended from one of those many, many trysts. My twin died in the womb though.”

Thórr wrapped his thoughts around Mia and sent her to the one place he knew she would be safe. He tried to follow, but his feet seemed melded to the concrete floor. Seconds later, Moran raised his hands, palms facing out, and shot white-hot fireballs at Thórr.

He felt searing pain in his head...then nothing.

* * * * *

Mia rose from the hardwood floor, her body still tingling from Thórr’s hasty transport, and her mind reeling from the abrupt mental disconnect from her lifemate. *Shit! Shit! Shit!*

Then she found herself staring into the startled gazes of four people who watched her from their seats on a large, black leather couch. A glance over her shoulder revealed a large screen television that blared with crashing music and frantic fighting. She recognized the movie. *Blade*.

“So I take it you’re Úlfr and Alrek? And these chicks are your lifemates?” She stood with hands on her hips, her head tilted in a cocky manner that she knew would rile the males. She saw the women glance at each other then halt the men who attempted to rise from the voluminous couch.

“Who are you? How do you know our names? Where the hell did you come from?” The one with blue eyes spat the questions at her as fast as machine-gun fire.

“Christ. You are just like him! My name is Mia Simon. I don’t have time to answer the ‘how do you know’ shit. And Thórr, that rat bastard, sent me away so the Vamp Vigil wouldn’t get me.” She looked around, noting the fact she was in a huge warehouse loft, standing in the living room area. Everything screamed EXPENSIVE, but at the same time seemed casual and cozy. The only thing she didn’t see was a door.

"Okay, so who's gonna zap me back to the church? Moran has Thórr, but he doesn't have the diary or the amulet. He can't perform the *Desrai Sa'ed* without the spell or the jewel."

The guy with the brown hair, Úlfr probably, rose from the couch. "The *Desrai Sa'ed*? The Vamp Vigil knows how to take a vampire's soul and his powers?"

"It's a long story," said Mia. "Moran can't zap the amulet. There's a spell on it. Either it's freely given by the possessor or it shatters. He needs me to give it to him. But the diary... Fuck. I bet he's already gotten that. No spells on Delicia's journal."

Thórr... Where are you? She mentally reached out for him, trying to connect, but met only distance and silence. Her heart clenched. He hadn't fallen in love with her yet. But she knew what he did not and accepted what he could not—she was his lifemate.

Carla had done the magic, had taken Mia into the past, and had given her the gift of Thórr. Hours later, her sister was murdered by Moran, who had been beyond pissed off to realize his archeologist had given away the amulet.

"He's powerful. Really powerful. Why does he need Thórr and the ritual?" She paced in front of the couch, ignoring the couples now engaged in low, heated discussions. "I mean, please, we're not talking the ol' world domination ploy, are we? This isn't a cartoon." She stopped, sucked in a breath. "His magic is borrowed!"

Her outburst gained the attention of the others. "That asshole! He must have spent years tracking down descendents of Delicia and sucking away their powers. They weren't vamps though. They had tainted blood, weak blood. They were too human. He wouldn't need the ritual to destroy them. No, he had the histories, the ancient texts...spells would be enough..."

"*Madre de Dios!*" The little dark-haired woman sprung off the couch and marched to Mia, shaking a finger at her. "What are you talking about? Where is Thórr?"

Mia blinked down at the spitfire, unconcerned about the woman's anger. Her mind spun as the pieces fell together. "Delicia was the last pureblood. When she died, all the ancients' true powers and magic died with her. Her descendents don't have enough

long-lasting juice for Moran. The only thing closest to a pureblood is one of the cursed ones. And of those, Thórr is the last. He's the only chance Moran has to gain true, permanent power – and become an immortal."

"If he performs the ritual, Thórr will die." Úlfr joined his wife and clasped her hand.

"It will be worse than death," Mia said, feeling a hot ache in her throat. "His soul will be Moran's, trapped forever in the amulet as the conduit for his energy, his power."

"Where's the amulet?" asked Alrek.

Mia stared at Alrek, at Úlfr, at the two women. She had laid claim to Thórr and by doing so, she also laid claim to his village. The past was gone, and even though it connected her soul to Thórr's, she knew they could not relive old lives. The only thing she could do for Thórr now was to trust those he loved. She sucked in a fortifying breath. "I buried it in Thórr's cemetery."

* * * * *

"Can't this fucking car go any faster?" asked Mia.

"We're doing a hundred and ten," said Alrek. "It's a Beemer, not a jet."

Úlfr sat on the passenger side of the little black car, staring out the window, his jaw tense. Apparently he and Alrek were too human to do something effective, like zap her to Thórr. The two women, Charron and Roja, had stayed at the loft to make preparations for the rescue operation, but Mia had refused to tell the men the exact location of the amulet. Those jackasses were not leaving her behind like some war bride.

The engine hummed smoothly despite the rate of high speed. One hundred and ten? It felt like two miles an hour. Argh! "What the hell is the engine made of? Two gerbils on a wheel? Go faster!"

"She reminds me of Delicia," said Úlfr.

Mia rolled her eyes. "I am Delicia."

Chapter Ten

Úlfr's head whipped around, his narrowed gaze flaring bright with anger. Alrek didn't ease up on his driving, but she felt his hostility, almost heard his screech of denial.

"Don't speak to us of our beloved," hissed Úlfr. "Delicia and Aleia belonged to us all...until Aleia chose Alrek."

"And I chose Thórr," she said quietly. "He knew of my choice, but asked that even if I could not share my heart, that I would share my body with you. He loved you, Úlfr, and I did as well. And because we loved you, we could not break your heart."

"Aleia offered herself to me early in our courtships," reminded Alrek. "Neither you nor Thórr had settled your claims on her."

"We wished you only health and happiness, Alrek" said Úlfr. Sincerity rang in his voice, but Mia knew he had not—no, he *could* not—have let go of Delicia in the same way. He had wanted Delicia nearly as much Thórr. He frowned at Mia, proving her suspicions correct. "You are *not* Delicia."

"Believe what you want, oh stubborn one." She grinned, unrepentant. He turned to face the front window. "But if you let Thórr die because you distrust me, I will gut you with a rusty spoon."

"She sure as hell sounds like Delicia," muttered Alrek.

Mia smiled. If they only knew...

* * * * *

"It's more like puzzle pieces," explained Mia as she dug up the amulet. While she was waiting to die from the stupid impalement, she had taken the amulet from her pocket and buried it under her butt. "Reincarnation isn't one whole soul going from one

body to another. It's more like the soul bringing along pieces of previous lives into a new body. People change, every day. Experiences change us all. And the soul cannot remain unchanged from life to life."

"So you are Delicia. And yet, you are not."

"I am the soul who was Delicia. Now I'm Mia."

"You know," said Úlfr as he took the dirt-encrusted amulet from Mia's triumphant fingers. "She almost makes sense."

"Except how can she love Thórr as Mia when she loved him as Delicia?" asked Alrek, taking her hand and hoisting her up.

"Because Carla showed me the past and the future," said Mia as she stretched her legs.

"And your future lies with Thórr?" Úlfr sneered, but she didn't sense a true disgust. He still had too many of his vamp senses to recognize that she spoke the truth. Even without the lingering of his former powers, she suspected Úlfr would know if she was a liar.

Crud. Her jeans were stained with soil, which just got worse as she tried to dust it off. Then she smelled something sour and rotten. Good God. She hadn't dug down as far as the corpse in the grave, had she? "What's that stench?"

"Sacrifice," said Alrek. "Sometimes Thórr gets roadkill put at his door in weird offerings from the few locals who know about this place."

"Yuck." Mia gave up on her jeans and tried to push out the dirt from her under her nails. She needed a manicure desperately. "So what's next, boys?"

"We need you to do a mind hookup with Thórr," said Alrek. "And make him tell us where he is."

"Yeah, like I haven't been trying to do that since Thórr zapped me to your place." Alrek's eyebrows rose because he'd realized she'd stopped short of adding *you idiot*. Mia smiled innocently, batting her lashes like a flirtatious debutante. Then she stretched

her arms over her head trying to work out the kinks in her back. The smell of rot seemed stronger now. "Ew. It's like someone threw up in sour milk then added spoiled lima beans and old gym socks just to make it smell worse."

"Charming." Úlfr looked over Mia's shoulder. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

She saw Alrek take in Úlfr's surprise then he too turned and looked over her shoulder. "Did we wander onto a movie set?" he asked.

"No." Mia turned around and joined Úlfr and Alrek in their incredulity. Three decomposing corpses shuffled toward them, like characters from a very, very bad zombie movie. Mia closed her eyes, counted to five, and opened them.

"Fucking A. Zombies."

"Ridiculous." Úlfr handed Mia the amulet and she stuffed the priceless ruby necklace encased in gold into her pocket. He peered at their not-so-fast attackers and scrunched his nose. "Zombies don't exist."

"Kinda like how vampires who've lived a thousand years don't exist, huh?"

"You are very annoying."

"You're not the first to make that observation."

Mia watched the animated corpses with confusion and trepidation. She knew firsthand that Moran's powers were strong. He'd killed Carla with nothing more than a muttered word and a hand flip. The fireball had incinerated her sister. Her stomach squeezed with remembered pain and nausea. She knew now, thanks to her sis, that they would meet again. That life really was immortal, but ever changing. Still, she missed her twin with an ache that robbed her of breath.

Moran, that stupid prick, had a sick, childish sense of humor to raise three moldering corpses in an attempt to distract them. *What are you trying to do, asswipe?* Did this mean he was close? Maybe he never left Thórr's church.

Mia watched the zombies groan and shuffle their way through the thorny, cluttered graveyard. *Oh fuck this.* She ran forward, grabbed the neck of the first one, wrenched off its head, and tossed the skull as far away as possible. Two snap kicks left the poor thing legless. It thudded to the ground and lay still.

An roundhouse kick knocked off the second dead guy's head, the body fell over and shattered. The third zombie reached for Mia's shoulders, but she popped off its arms, used the shriveled appendages like a double bat and, *swing batter*, off went the skull into the dark starless night. That body collapsed next to the others.

She looked over her shoulder at Alrek and Úlfr. They smirked at her as if her kicking zombie ass didn't impress them. "Are you losers ready to go?"

"You're right, Alrek," said Úlfr as they joined her. "Our little heroine sounds just like Delicia."

* * * * *

"Why must you go hunting?"

"To feed our village, silly woman."

Delicia pouted, her skin flushed and dewed with sweat from their recent lovemaking. Splayed on the animal furs, she looked like Freya, the mother goddess. Oh, Delicia could command him just as well as any deity. Her whims might destroy him if their edges weren't blunted by her love. He grinned, wondering what his goddess had in mind for their games. Her dark eyes sparkled with mischief. Thórr couldn't resist tangling his fingers into her thick, brown hair.

"You are beautiful," he murmured.

"Take me to wife, then," she whispered, an ache in her voice.

"Úlfr..."

"We will find another for him. We are for each other, beloved."

"Does he not please you?" Thórr buried his face into Delicia's neck so that she could not see the possessiveness that surely flared in his eyes. When had jealousy wormed its way into his

heart? Did he not wish Alrek well when he claimed Aliea only for himself? And Delicia delighted in serving him and Úlfr, sometimes spending long nights between the two of them, accepting all and more they had to give...and to take.

"When did we fall in love?" His tongue lapped at her wet, fragrant flesh, nipping at her neck. "For I do love you, my Delicia. But I love Úlfr, too. He is my brother, if not in blood – "

"Then in heart." She turned on her side and faced him, stroking the beard that covered his cheeks. "I, too, love him. If I could claim you for my husband, Thórr, I would do so."

"Then let us have a ceremony," he said. "Here, now."

Her smile broke his heart. How he wished she would never again look at Úlfr with lust or with kindness. Maybe...maybe they could find someone else for his friend.

"I promise to be your husband, Delicia. To hold you in my heart for all time. I will protect you and cherish you, until I breathe my last."

"I promise to be your wife, Thórr. I will protect you with my life and cherish you always." She grabbed his hands and kissed his knuckles, her lips warm and wet against his skin. "I promise to love you until my soul no longer exists."

They kissed, tender urgency unfolding between them. His fingers found her hip and trailed to the dark patch of hair that still held the evidence of pleasure taken moments before. Still, she was wet for him and as one finger slipped between the moist folds, the intake of her breath stoked the fire in his groin.

He could plunge into her, right now, and explode. But no...not yet. He pushed her away from him, rolling her to the other side, then pulled her close, closer, until her buttocks rested against his semi-erect cock. With gentle hands, he traced her thighs and abdomen, drawing swirls and swords with light touches until she shuddered against him, her arms reaching up to clutch the braids in his hair.

"Will you beg me?" he asked, his hands inching over her ribs to tease the undersides of her full breasts. His words made her writhe closer, her ass wriggling on his hard cock, the length of it slipping between her buttocks.

"Delicia," he said in a sharp voice, both to rouse her into the game and to prevent himself from slipping his cock between her legs and penetrating the warm, silky valley that waited. "Will you beg me?"

"I deny you nothing, husband."

Husband. He swallowed the knot in his throat at the endearment. Such a simple word, but the bonds it named, those could not be cut by time, by distance...or by Úlfr.

"What do you want, my wife?"

"Please," she panted. "Touch me."

"Where?" His question was a barely restrained growl.

"My breasts. They ache for your hands."

He cupped her breasts, squeezing them until she cried out, stretching against him, her voice snagged by the pleasurable torment. "Please..."

"Please...what?"

"My nipples. I want you to pinch them. To twist them as you..." Her head fit just underneath his chin and she turned so her mouth touched his neck. Her tongue swiped the sweat caused by his restraint and he pushed against her, his cock hard and throbbing and needy.

She bit him then, taking the blood so necessary to her survival.

As she drank, he pinched Delicia's nipples, her cry causing a jolt in his penis. He could not decide on grin or grimace as his very knowledgeable woman reached between their bodies to thumb away the seed that dribbled from his cock. As a reward, he twisted her nipples. She bit his neck to hold her shout then returned his favor by wrapping delicate fingers around his cock and stroking.

"What do you want, beloved?" he asked, the words falling into the deep night of her hair.

"You. Only you, Thórr." She lifted her leg and guided him to her pussy. They both trembled as he pushed inside, his cock swelling against her sweet flesh, slick with her juices, tight with her need.

Her fingers replaced his on her nipples. His hands fell to her hips and he anchored himself there as he thrust inside her pussy. He watched Delicia pleasure her own breasts, her eyes closed,

her movements frantic, and one of his hands stole to her womanhood, pushing through the sable pubic hair until his thumb found her clitoris. He pumped inside her, his breath harsh against her cheek, his thumb pressing and pushing against her clit, watching the tug and twist of her long fingers against her big, round nipples...

"Delicia!" The orgasm rendered him senseless, forced him to clutch her as his seed spurted into her pussy, as sensation after sensation stole his words, his thoughts. Slowly, slowly, his breath eased back into his lungs.

Moments later, pumping against his still stroking thumb, she arched, and bent her head to take his kiss. Her cries of joy spilled into his mouth as the evidence of her pleasure soaked his cock, his fingers, and their clenched thighs.

When Thórr awoke, he was strapped, bare-assed, to a cold concrete slab. Something about the scene looked vaguely familiar. Ah yes. The room lit only by candles of all shapes, sizes and scents looked like the one Alrek and Charron had described when Charron had been a captive of the Vamp Vigil. No one was in the small room with him, but he imagined that would not be the case for long.

Steel cuffs encircled his wrists and ankles, two lengths of chain bound him across the chest and thighs. He recognized the spells that enhanced the metal. He wouldn't be able to break free on his own. Damn.

The memory of Delicia, inflicted as a dream, haunted him. To know that she'd been sold as a slave, as a sexual tool, to many men—damn it all—that she had lived long after he'd given up searching for her. Long after he stopped believing in good, in God. *Me? The holy one?* Not even close. He had accepted Jantra's punishment, not for Aliea. Not for Alrek. Not even for the child those lovers had created. But for Delicia. His wife.

Tears pricked his eyes and he squeezed them closed. A thousand years was a long time. How easy it had been to store away the memories, to pretend to forget. As his emotions faded and his hunger for blood, for sexual conquest overtook his humanity, had it not been the loss of Delicia that drove him into the life he had chosen with his

brothers? How foolish, how selfish, how goddamned stupid they had all been. *I will love you until my soul no longer exists.*

The remembered vow, whispered so tenderly on the very day he had lost her, broke Thórr. With a sound only a demon would make as it burst through its chains in hell, he incinerated the steel and spells binding him. And as the ashes fell from his body, only one thought echoed from his mind...

Delicia. Forgive me!

* * * * *

"Got him!" yelled Mia. The former vamps poking around Thórr's abandoned room looked at her, startled. Well, she was startled too. The instant connection crackled in her mind like lightning. Shit, Thórr was pissed. *Really pissed.*

"Where?" demanded Úlfr.

"What am I? GPS?" She squeezed her eyes shut and looked at the room where Thórr was held captive. Her heart galloped in fear and dread. Her beloved was in a terrible state, seized by guilt and anger, and still powerful given the blown apart candles, roasted chains...and oops, there went the concrete slab. It crumbled like a cookie dunked too many times in milk. Quickly, she described the room and Alrek whooped.

"I know where that is! Can't those assholes find a new lair?"

"Moran isn't usually so predictable," she admitted, eyes still closed as she struggled to keep open the mental lines to Thórr.

"Sacred space," muttered Úlfr. "If the Vamp Vigil has found an energy portal and created rituals within it, it qualifies for the sacred space necessary to perform the *Desrai Sa'ed*."

"How do you know?" asked Alrek.

"I remembered." He shrugged at Alrek's skeptical expression. "I think we spent so much time repressing the memories of those early times, we convinced ourselves that

we had forgotten everything but our need for blood and for sex. But when the door to the mind swings open..." His gaze pierced Mia. "All that was love and sorrow comes with the memories."

"And with the truth, oh stubborn one?"

"Delicia called me that." His lips quirked. "I didn't remember until now."

The contact with Thórr faded. She tried to zap him some love and light, but the connection sizzled and snapped off with the same ferocity it had snapped on. Her eyes opened. "He's angry. Frenzied. We have to hurry."

Chapter Eleven

Thórr stood in the room, his rage a living beast inside him. He had never been a berserker, but he had witnessed those vicious, crazed men in war. He felt crazed and angry, for even though he'd broken his bonds and destroyed the room, he could not leave it. Moran's magic was stronger than he ever would've believed possible. And it kept him prisoner. He could neither walk out the door nor zap himself to safety.

Moran entered the room, dressed in black leather pants, black boots, and, strangely, a red velour cape. He wore no shirt and his chest gleamed as if oiled. His brows rose as he assessed the damage. With a snap of his fingers, the candles that survived Thórr's temper tantrum flamed anew. None of the holders were intact so only the floor was highlighted, leaving most of the room in shadows.

"You've been a very bad boy," said Moran. He walked through the ruins until he stood in front of Thórr. "It's a shame you broke the sacrificial table. We imported that from Peru. Many a strong man...and unfaithful woman died on that stone. Centuries ago, their beating hearts were ripped out from their chests and offered to the gods."

"You think you're going to rip out my heart?"

"No, Thórr." Moran patted Thórr's cheek like an errant father would his son. "I'm going to rip out your soul."

* * * * *

Mia floored the Beemer, ignoring the sulky expression of her passenger. Alrek had used his cell phone to call Charron and Roja. The women would meet them at the Vamp Vigil's hideout. Once Alrek had finished the call, he alternated between gripping the armrest and glaring at the speedometer.

"Bet you didn't know it could go one-eighty, did you?"

"I wished I still didn't know," he said between clenched teeth. "You're going to kill us."

Mia laughed. "Sucks to be mortal, doesn't it?"

"Only right now."

When they arrived at the abandoned factory, the Beemer's headlights cut across the white Lexus parked near a broken door. Charron and Roja stood next to the trunk, each holding a bag and a gun. Mia pulled next to the car and cut the engine. Everyone gathered near the door.

"Anyone else feel like we're in a Scooby-Doo cartoon?" asked Úlfr.

"Har, har," said Mia, but she grinned.

"What's the plan?" whispered Charron.

"We go in, we kick ass, and we rescue Thórr." Mia opened the door and entered the creepy, dark building.

The ex-vampires and their lifemates followed.

* * * * *

Thórr knelt before Moran, head bowed, and seethed. Paralyzed, he was a statue of flesh and bone. The rage simmered inside, a thousand years worth of regret and self-hatred boiling—and no way to expend the rising flood.

With his exceptional vision, Thórr could see the floor, the shiny toes of Moran's ridiculous black boots, the shattered pieces of stone and wax chips from the blasted candles. But his ears heard what his eyes could not see—that Mia and his friends had arrived. The sounds of fighting and screaming echoed into the room. They were tearing through Moran's Vamp Vigil morons with a speed and viciousness that pleased Thórr.

"You will watch her die," said Moran. Anger trembled in his voice. "You will watch them all die."

Thórr realized whatever plans his enemy had made for him, for Mia, those plans had failed. He could taste Moran's fear and hear the beat of it in the wild pounding of

his heart. But something stronger kept the terror at bay – greed. Moran had killed too many and waited too long not to realize his dream of power and immortality.

‘Thórr! I am here.’

‘I know you’re here, you little idiot. You’re crazy. Why the hell did you come?’

‘You still owe me that fuck.’

If he had the ability, he would’ve laughed. In that moment, Mia opened her heart to Thórr, let him feel her joy, her relief – and her love. It was impossible. How could she love him?

‘Moran is in the room with me. I’m paralyzed. His magic is too strong. I can’t fight it.’

‘Try harder, vampire. We’re almost there. Any advice?’

‘Yeah. Don’t die.’

Thórr heard Mia and her new posse enter the room. Despite attempts to strain every muscle in his body to move – *damn it, move!* – he could not twitch an eyebrow. All he had was his hearing and his connection to Mia, except that she had lowered mind shields.

“Give me the amulet!” screamed Moran.

“Oh fuck you,” said Mia.

Thórr heard a wet *thunk*, a labored gasp, and a crash as something large and heavy fell to the floor.

In that instant, his body was released. He jumped to his feet, fists at the ready. His head snapped up to find Mia staring at him, a hand on her hip, a smirk on her lips. “Kinda anticlimactic, ain’t it?”

Moran sprawled on the floor, his gaze wide and unseeing. Embedded in his chest was the rusted iron spike that had impaled Mia.

“Appropriate, right?” she asked. “I figured Moran would understand the symbolism, you know, how it pierc –”

Thórr's lips covered hers, tasting the sweetness on a mouth that so often spoke acidic words. He did not understand her, or his feelings for her. He knew his friends stood by the door, watching and waiting...and wondering.

'You're naked, Thórr.'

'You're not.'

'That's easily remedied. But if we're going to have a show, maybe we should charge admission.'

Thórr wrapped his arms around Mia.

Zap!

They disappeared.

* * * * *

When Mia opened her eyes, she saw the night sky. The stars looked like sugar sprinkles on a chocolate cake. The low crash of waves against the shore and the soft sand under her bare ass gave her a clue about their location. Sorta. Shadows of palm trees, the snick and flick of insects, the warm breeze buffeting her nude body. *Okay then...*they were on a tropical island located God knew where.

Thórr lay next to her playing with the gold hoop in her navel. She turned to him and stared into his black gaze. She saw his confusion and his hope. She stroked his hair. "There's so much to tell you."

"Later," he said, nuzzling her neck.

"You managed to get my clothes off."

"I plan to get *you* off."

"Wow. Such a romantic guy." She laughed when he rolled on top of her, growling, but her chuckles turned to moans as Thórr took one of her nipples into his mouth and rolled it between lips and tongue. "Holy God. Do it again."

He obliged.

Pleasure stabbed her belly. Her arms wound around his neck, encouraging his delightful torture of her breasts. Her palms slid over the muscles in his back and she relished every contour, every dip. She cupped his ass, the man had a *great* ass, and pushed his erection into her clitoris. *Oh yeah.*

An unraveling rope of desire wound and twisted through her as she pumped ever-so-slightly against the thick head of his cock.

"You could make me come," she whispered, "just by doing this."

"Let's give it a try, shall we?"

Every lick and tug of Thórr's mouth on her breasts built the passion. Every tiny thrust against his cock stoked the fires. But only when Thórr's fangs pierced her breast at the same time he sucked her nipple did the orgasm claim her and sweep her away on a tide much stronger than the one that licked at their feet.

"More," she begged.

He sealed the wound with quick rasps of his tongue. Then he turned to her other breast and played with the nipple. She felt his fang scrape it, his tongue lave it... '*Damn it, more. More!*'

'*Yes, my darling Mia. I will give you more.*'

She hadn't yet crashed from the most amazing feeling she'd ever felt, other than her love for Thórr, and found herself greedy to find the peak again. She felt Thórr's hunger, his struggle to keep control. He feared he would kill her. It had been too long since he fed, too long since he fucked.

"Do it!" she demanded, yanking his hair, pushing him toward her breast.

He lifted his head, his gaze so black it was like looking into hell. "No."

Rolling off her, he sat down, his fists clutching sand, and stared at the ocean. "I won't kill you."

"You're right about that." She dove onto him, latching onto his lap. He clutched her waist, as if he meant to toss her off but couldn't quite bring himself to do it. And in that second of hesitation, she slipped onto his cock and squeezed.

His control snapped.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, not caring that his fingers clawed her flesh as he penetrated her, his cock thrusting so deep she felt the trembling of her womb.

She matched his fervent movements, digging her heels into the sand, her hands gripping his hair as she shoved his face at her breast.

"Please, Thórr. Take from me. I'm yours."

His fangs pierced her flesh, and he sucked on the nipple at the same time he drank from the wound. His cock pumped into her, rapid and desperate, and he brought her orgasm not once, but twice. Gasping, panting, and hanging for dear life, her heart pounded and her skin slicked with sweat and still he fucked her.

Still, he drank from her.

Then, he lifted his head, his mouth red with her blood, and heaved her off his lap. Before she could protest, he was behind her, roughly pulling her hips in line with his and plunging into her pussy.

She couldn't catch her breath, but damned if she didn't love the ride. He forced her to the ground, her clitoris grinding against the sand with each stroke of his cock. His fangs pierced her shoulder, his moans of joy and need soft in her ear.

With the sands scraping her clit and her aching nipples, she felt the unbelievable rise of pleasure cresting then crashing. She cried out, riding the wave, clutching at the sand, as her juices spilled onto the beach.

Thórr released her shoulder and jerked out of her, moving away. Afraid, he was trying to freaking save her again. She rolled over and prepared to give chase.

He was on his knees, staring at her, his gaze of predator sighting his prey. His cock jutted from the patch of pale hair between his muscular thighs, slick with her come, big and succulent.

She crawled toward him, not caring that he might pounce on her any second and rend her with his twin hungers. She kneeled before him, feeling a mixture of need and exhaustion, love and fear.

Then she bent low and drew his cock into her mouth, licking off her own residue, kissing and tasting every beautiful inch. Her fingers paid homage to his balls, pulling, cupping, kneading.

Thórr's hands tangled in her hair, and she took him fully, tip to base, quickening her pace, enjoying the hard, sweet feel of him sliding between her lips, slipping into her throat.

His thighs tightened, he gasped, his cock trembled...and she stopped, yanking away from his grip. "Not yet," she said. "Not until you're in me."

Falling onto her back, she opened for him, and he eagerly crawled on top of her, his mouth on hers as his cock filled her pussy.

"Fuck me," she demanded. "Make me yours, Thórr. Forever."

It took only the words for him to finally come, his shout echoing into the night as he emptied his seed into her. As the intense orgasm shuddered through him, Mia held Thórr close, wrapping her arms and her love around him. He quivered and groaned, his body seized by rapture, until he collapsed against her, sated.

Epilogue

One Year Later

They met at Alrek's warehouse, the once expensively furnished loft now filled with toys and other trappings of parenthood. The smells of baby powder and oatmeal lingered—as testament to the morning's activities. Alrek and Charron were kept more than busy by their baby girl, Eleane.

Six people circled the dining room table and stared at the ruby and gold amulet.

"Are you sure?" asked Roja. "It is so beautiful. And none here is a blood taker."

"It's dangerous," said Mia.

"It would be dangerous," agreed Úlfr, "if Delicia's diary had survived the fire."

The night Thórr claimed as his lifemate, Mia, who he accepted had once been Delicia, the others had set fire to the abandoned building to hide the evidence of the Vamp Vigils' activities—and their deaths. Delicia's diary had been hidden there, in Moran's office, and it had not survived the flames.

"It seems wrong," said Charron, "to destroy the last thing that belonged to a people who suffered so much."

"We don't know that it doesn't have other powers," said Alrek. "The only way to be sure that its danger is gone is to destroy it. Have we not all learned that we cannot live in the past?"

Alrek had asked Mia if Charron was the reincarnated soul of Aliea. Mia explained that Alrek had loved her sister and their daughter so well, they had chosen the Light. Not every soul revisited the Earthly plane. And there were many more journeys for those souls who chose not to inhabit a mortal body.

"Maybe we shouldn't destroy it," murmured Mia. She put her hands on her rounded belly. Thórr stepped behind her and joined his hands with hers. Their child

kicked against the intrusion. Mia's soft chuckle wound around his very human heart. He dropped a kiss onto her hair and inhaled the lavender scent of her shampoo.

"It is Mia's choice," said Thórr. "She paid a heavy price for this treasure."

Mia tilted her head to give him a kiss then returned her attention to the necklace. "I don't think we should destroy it," she said.

Mia picked up the amulet. The sunlight filtering in from the floor-length windows glinted off the large ruby. It was the color of blood, of sacrifice. "We'll hide it. And we must believe that whoever needs it, will find it."

"You believe in fate?" Thórr asked.

Mia smiled at him. "Silly man. I believe in love."

The End

About the Author

Multi-published in several genres, award-winning author Michele Bardsley spends her days creating fictional worlds because, let's face it, reality sucks. A prime example is that no one has yet to figure out how to make calorie-free chocolate. What's up with THAT?

Michele lives in Oklahoma where she is held hostage by her two children, her husband, and three cats. Occasionally her family remembers to feed her, but mostly she's forced to nibble on copy paper while eking out her next story. The manacles make it difficult to type, but she manages.

Michele welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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