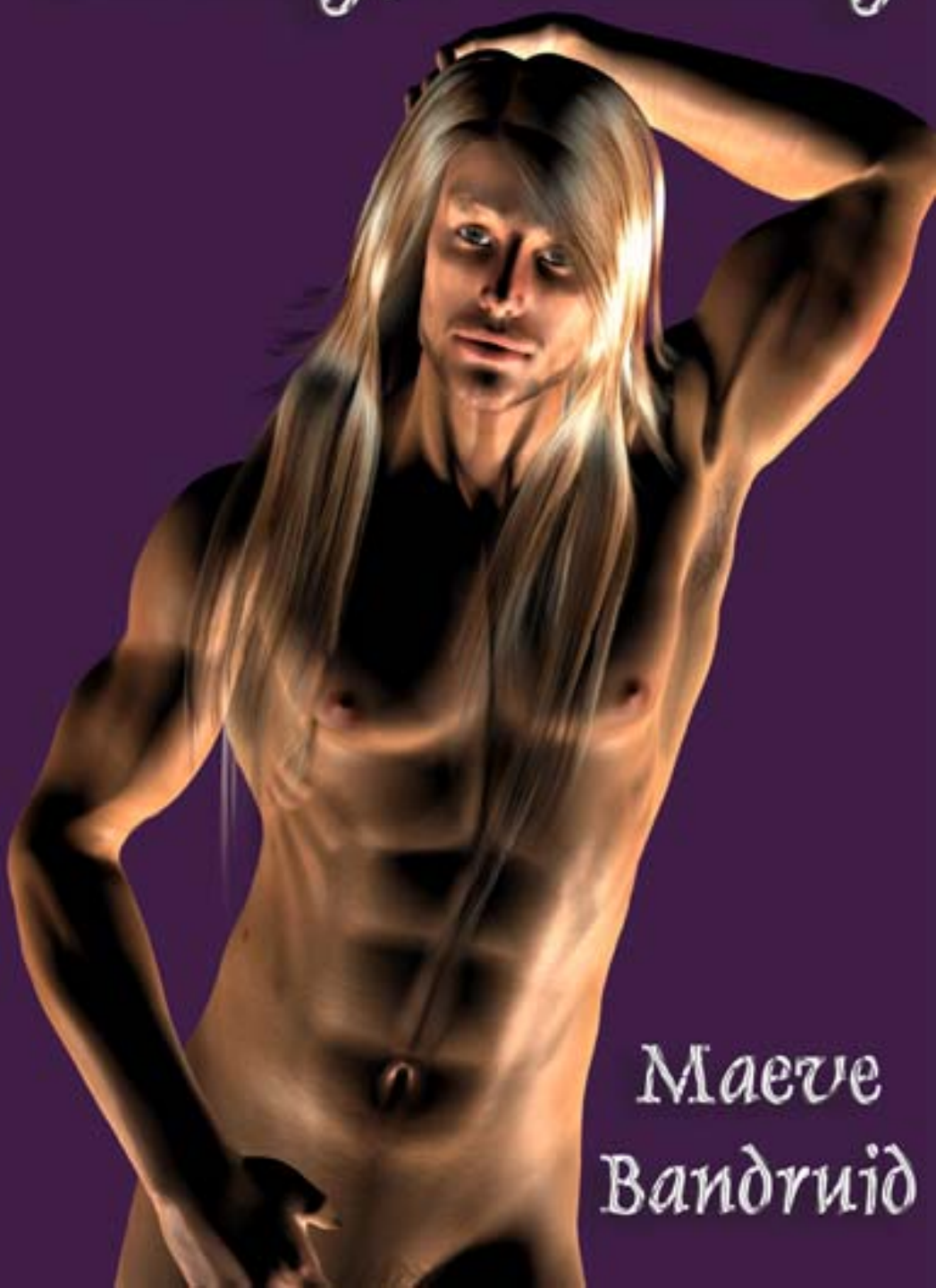


# Twilight Calling



Maeve  
Bandruid

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## **DEDICATION:**

This book is dedicated to all those who have ever felt  
“different”.

Also to my Mother, the most giving and self  
sacrificing soul that I have ever met.

And finally, a world of thanks to Stefani, Martine, and  
Morgan. For all your shared wisdom, and believing in  
me.

## CHAPTER ONE

MAY 1<sup>ST</sup>, 2001

**I**t was Beltane.

Raina would know it without a calendar, as her ancestors had. Charting the path of the stars between stones. Scenting it on the wind like some wild creature of the deep wood throwing its massive head back to bay at a silver crescent moon hanging drunkenly in the sky.

A salty sea breeze blew over twisted, ancient Torrey pines and around skyscrapers to her second story; rooftop sanctuary. Echoing softly in her soul with the life swimming within its black depths; calling her home to a watery reunion.

It was the first element she had ever felt welcome in. The cold Pacific waters rushing over her head...calling her out past the breakers and into the glassy roll of all beginnings. Being a fire sign, her aunt couldn't understand it. But then again, her aunt didn't understand a lot of things, and Aunt Lula was proud to admit her ignorance. It was those who thought they knew everything that knew so very little.

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Hypocrisy grows in minds like that, and if there was one thing Aunt Lula wasn't, it was a hypocrite.

Shaking her head, her sable mane of hair fell about her sun-worshipping shoulders and red-rimmed violet eyes. Twilight eyes, what the sky turns after the sun has given up its radiance...dying-sun eyes.

Raina looked past the man-made, electric stars filling the horizon as the sun set. People coming home, some to loved ones; and others, like herself, to an echoing of emptiness that kills the spirit and slowly destroys the mind...turning it cynical and jaded.

She'd once believed she would find her Prince Charming. The One she would know in any form, in every lifetime. Her soul mate, her beloved, her own. But here she was, almost twenty-nine but feeling more like ninety...and she had yet to find him.

One of her oldest memories was wondering at the empty feeling she held in her heart. She must have been three or four, sitting out on the front porch, wondering why it felt like a part of her was missing. By the time she was five, she'd been looking for Him; the one her momma would read to her about before she'd dream. Her handsome gallant that would wake her sleeping soul. The one who would fill the empty place...her other half.

There was a time, once, when she thought she had found her mate for this life; the man who would cherish her forever and always. He would chase away the very real monsters, and rub her temples when the headaches got too bad.

Gods, how she'd loved him. So much, it'd been

both pleasure and pain. She was only happy when in his presence and wretched when they'd been apart.

She'd given him her innocence beneath the summer stars; the full moon's light brushing their skin in silver as he'd held her against his rapidly beating heart.

He'd sworn that night, in words that sounded much too formal for a grassy field and moonlight; that nothing and no one would ever put a wedge between them. She still wore the plain silver band he'd given her on the charm bracelet she wore on her right wrist. It kept company with a fairy bell, a tiny pair of baby shoes with the date of Luna's birth, and a small silver pentacle with a moonstone in the center of the star.

Maybe she'd been a real bitch in a past life, breaking hearts and rending dreams like some egomaniacal gigolo; carelessly wading through other's hope and dreams. So, maybe this was karma kicking her in the ass for past misdeeds. She was no angel; no fire sign ever could be. She was a Leo to the core, and in her youth made sure everyone damn well knew it. She was the queen of the zodiac, and all had revolved around her...until the one who had rocked her to sleep each night died.

It was at the very young age of four when she'd discovered that no matter how loudly you plead to the gods, no matter how you threaten or weep, they've got their own agenda. And there isn't a damn thing you can do to change what you sense coming.

Yeah, some called it a gift, what she could do; sense what was to come. On the really painful ones,

she could actually see it as if she stood beside them while they died. Begging them not to go, and knowing they would anyway. She'd stopped telling people about the sense when her father had died; the one man who had meant everything to her.

Mercifully, she hadn't seen him die, just known when he was gone. Running to her mother; sobbing between ragged breaths as she tried to tell her that something was wrong. Her mother had never truly forgiven her for not seeing it sooner; for not stopping him from dying.

Hades, how could her mom forgive what even she couldn't...wouldn't.

After that, her mom had kind of drifted off. Laura's beloved mate was gone, and even their four-year-old child wasn't enough to make her want to stay in this realm. So, Laura had left.

Not physically, no, but the woman who had once held her, sang songs to her, braided her hair and made her feel precious and loved was gone. And the woman who remained was an empty husk of the vibrant, magical creature she'd once been.

Her first day of kindergarten, she'd found out the other kids didn't hear the voices in the wind, or the tinkling laughter in the shadows. Aunt Lula told her she had to speak with her mouth to be heard, and that most kids were absolutely clueless when it came to calling a bird from its perch on a high, tip-top branch or a cat from across the street.

Raina was different, with her slanted, odd-colored eyes and long-fingered hands that could call the breeze. The kids knew it, as a pack of wild dogs

recognizes an outsider and shuns entrance into the pack with bared teeth and claws. Well, badly aimed rocks and taunting chants...sticks and stones may break my bones, but names, they scar forever. What cruel creatures kids can be.

"I wonder if karma gives them slack because they're learning?" Raina murmured as she brushed her waist-length hair behind her shoulder.

Placing her hands beside her hips, she pushed herself up off the flannel blanket she'd thrown across the cold tiles of the roof-top patio and wrapped her arms about her waist; using herself as an anchor as her world spun wildly from one axis to another.

She should have never closed the Loft for Beltane. She should have stayed busy with people who smiled and laughed with her downstairs, singing away the night to a tune floating across the street from a band playing at the Dubliner.

But no, she'd gotten a hair up her ass, closed shop, and headed to the roof with a bottle of Aunt Lula's Black Water. Conveniently forgetting for the moment she hated the stuff, and losing count of how many shots she'd toasted to one goddess or another. Laughing as the wind tickled the hairs about her neck, calling her to play as if she were a child once again.

But then, it was Beltane. A time of fertile possibilities...

Putting the bottle down with a solid thunk, she walked over to the circle she had prepared for ritual tonight, gathered the rose petals from the basket she had placed outside the markings, and began walking



in a clockwise circle as she dropped them randomly. Quietly, she began the goddess chant, one complex and ancient name after another rolling off her lips from years of practice; the building magic raising goose bumps over her naked arms. Easing her mind into a place all practitioners went when walking the moon paths, calling the elements, or seeking inner peace.

But she was far from peaceful right now. She was bent on ending this cycle of lonely nights and calling upon every favor owed her, every alliance made, to bring to her what might ease an age-old torment. For better or ill, ready or not, she was going to find out if Eros was a true friend to her tonight, or if she needed to start lighting a candle to another.

"Tower of the East, Air. I beseech your aid this night, to send my voice in all directions, carrying my words to whisper within the ear of my beloved." As the match flared, it broke the darkness with a burst of light and sulfur, the white flame blazing to yellow as it was lowered within the tinted glass of the candle holder.

"Tower of the South, Fire. I call upon you to set the blood of my beloved racing, fuel him with the desire to find me, and take me as his own." Again, a match flared, to fill the darkness with a tinge of red. Bathing her face in its crimson glow beside a dark velvet bag filled with sandalwood and cinnamon.

"Tower of the West, Water. I beseech your aid, beneath the stars on this Beltane night, to bless and cleanse this union I seek, and make its love eternal as the tides." Blue tinged glass filled with light; the orb's

illumination mixing with the other candles to vaguely define the solitary figure that stood within a circle of salt and rose petals.

“Tower of the North, Earth. I beseech you, whom all Creation can call Mother and those who have walked softly within your womb know as Sacred. I ask you to wake the longing for home and hearth within my beloved and send him seeking for his mate.” Bending, Raina lit the green candle; the scent of sage and musk oil rising to her nose as she placed the candle upon a bed of ivy leaves and smoldering sage. The curling gray sage smoke brushed across her face; filling her senses, easing her mind.

But her mind wasn’t why she had called the circle tonight. Her heart was.

Kneeling in the center of the circle, she felt the tears that had burned down her cheeks for too many years begin to flow once again. Causing the ache in her throat to tighten; her lips bending downward with something she would not give a voice to. It was a moment of self-pity, and the last she would allow herself. She had gone too many years with a shadow hanging over her soul, and this night she would call the light to banish it.

Wiping her cheeks with the back of her left hand, she slowly forced herself to feel the Power of the casting, concentrating on the here and now, and not which she could no longer change.

“Lord and Lady of Light, you who are known as We, from which all began and will end. I search this night for a love to fill the hole within my soul. Bind these elements to my will, and call my life-mate to my

side. So mote it be.” Taking a deep breath, she drew within her the scent of sandalwood and sage, of growing things, and blessings, setting the gifts within her whirling.

It started at the top of her head, a shivering of magic along her spine, to pool at her feet. The spell wound its way about her knees, around her thighs and up her chest, to be taken within her body with each deep breath. She could feel its force building as she set the Power to her will, binding the elements to her words and the request she had asked of them.

*Focusing on her favorite star, which she wasn't even sure was a star with the way it so often twinkled with its ancient laughter; she found the light within herself and sent it straight out of her body into the heavens. Seeing the Power gather from the circle as the elements weaved within it, twining, and becoming one before separating to the four directions, the hum of Power slowly fading as the magic went about its way, seeking her beloved.*

*If he even existed...*

\* \* \* \*

It was Beltane.

The moon hung like a silver crescent in the sky, basking in the feel of magic flowing over him as circle upon circle was cast and released to another witch's bidding this night.

It was like a drug, the way it crawled over his golden skin, saturating his senses with the pure force of it, leaving him high and dizzy until another circle was cast and released.

Waves of sparkling warm energy...this circle cast for good fortune, one for inner peace, yet another for protection, all blending together, then separating into the four directions.

This night more than any other was a time for feasting, and for other earthy pursuits. And he was no different.

Lilly had fallen asleep after her fourth orgasm, her body exhausted, lying sprawled across her black ironwork bed, with the silver, silk sheets clinging to her pale skin and ruby hair.

They had been friends for years. She had been in Europe until tonight. Tracking him down at Haven as soon as she'd gotten in, and in her very Lilly way, making it seem she was doing him a favor as she coaxed him from his club. Purposely, he had no doubt, giving her limo driver quite a show as he brought them to her summer retreat at Lilly's downtown penthouse; top floor at the Hyatt.

He only hoped the major-domo at the door and the other staff had more discretion than she did; otherwise he would be hearing it from the others tomorrow night about the scene in the lobby. He'd had enough trouble getting the little nympho to the elevator before she'd stripped off her blouse, let alone her caressing him a bit publicly in front of some of the other guests on their way there.

Lilly was what the world of magic users liked to call Immune. She had built up so many shields as a child from one tragedy or another, no amount of psychic suggestion could touch her, or alter her very Lilly behavior.

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Aidan smoothed a searching hand across his bare shoulder, his sapphire eyes wincing as he touched yet another bite mark...he really needed to teach her how to leave a less jagged wound. Running a square-palmed hand through his dark blond hair, he wondered yet again why she had this need to gnaw on him during sex. But damned if she wasn't always interesting.

Rolling his shoulders, he could feel the next wave of magic coming like thunder across a stormy sky, the prickling on his skin turning to a vibrating hum, which became a wall of Power as he was slammed with the energy of the casting.

Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. The witch had called upon them all to bind this spell. And it wasn't for peace or wealth, it was for a Mate.

Fire found him, licking against his skin with need. Lust rolled through him, arching his back with Power as the element called to him, urging him to leave this place and find her; to take her beneath him, thrusting so deep within her that she would never think of another.

Turning, he walked silently over to the bed. He'd be no spell's plaything. Yet nothing had affected him this strongly in his memory. The spell, a Compelling, continued to roll through his mind, echoing the need to find her; feeling her passion lying just beneath the surface, waiting for him.

"Damned if I will." Yanking the sheet from Lilly's body, he firmly grasped her shoulder and gently rolled her onto her back. Stretching his nude, toned body over hers, he eased her legs apart to

accommodate his tanned hips and nipped her earlobe.

"Aidan?" Opening exhausted brown eyes, she looked up at him, pupils widening with delight at the deep sapphire color of his gaze and the raw need on his face.

Stretching her ivory skin against him, Lilly wrapped her long ballerina legs around his trim waist, locking her ankles against the small of his back.

"Care for another ride?" Her sleep-roughened voice rolled across his senses as she took him, hard and waiting, in her hand. Teasingly slow, she wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock and brought the tip of him to her, wet and waiting.

Dropping his head, he took her lips as he took her body; the spell of an unknown witch riding his back as he thrust again and again into a very willing lover.

Entwining their fingers, he brought her hands above her head as she arched against him; flesh slapping, bed creaking, Lilly moaning with each forceful thrust.

Aidan felt his canines slip from his gums, lengthening as his desire for both pleasure and Power entwined to become something raw and aching within him.

And, as always, Lilly was lost in her own world of blissed-out sex. Totally unaware as Aidan nudged her head to one side while he pounded into her body, rubbing his velvet lips against her slightly salty neck.

Aidan waited until her vaginal muscles began to clench him, spasming as she came hard and long before slipping his canines into the base of her neck and feeding from her life force. Lapping up both her

blood and her orgasm, as he came with a final thrust, returning to her a small portion of what her pleasure and blood had given him.

Closing the wounds in her neck with a thought, he felt his cock harden again as she stretched, satisfied, beneath him.

Dawn was still hours away. He could gorge himself on Lilly's lust until he was satisfied as well. Mayhap sip from her crimson nectar a time or two more...

Then, and only then, would he seek out this foolish witch. When his body was exhausted, her charms would have no affect. He would track her down and find out who dared to try and place a spell upon him, and make sure she knew never to do it again.

\* \* \* \*

He'd had a vision of his love, curled beside him upon the furs of a great black bear; her amber skin glowing from magic and firelight. Her hair, the varying colors of flame wrapped around his hands, clinging to him. Even in sleep, her body knew him to be her Mate, her beloved.

How long he had spent in trance, he had no idea. But now, something had awakened him to the world of flesh, the call still vibrating through his blood like the drums the children of Earth and Water so loved to play deep within their caves and upon the cliffs at sunset.

Breathing in the air, the ancient scent of sandalwood and cinnamon filled his nostrils, the

element urging him to rise and find her, this one whose loneliness had been much like his own before he had gone into the Great Sleep. Her need drew the last of the trance from his mind, setting him free to search back along the trail of the casting, but it was erratic and circled about itself time and again, weaving within each element and winding outward to the four directions. One of the elements had found him...Air.

The witch who had cast this spell had not been in complete control of her senses, or the forces which she had asked to do her bidding.

He could hear the words she had used for the casting of this spell, and what she sought for in this mate. But he also heard the lonely beating of her heart as her lips turned downward with silent tears. He tasted the sour juice of a sacred root upon her tongue and felt the heat, waiting just below the surface for the one which she called Mate.

Rising from a pile of white bear furs, he glanced about the room he had been placed in, before sending out a calling to those he knew would have been guarding him

As he rose, feet the color of copper dug into swirling shades of burgundy and gold, the patterns of the East familiar to him, making him wonder if what he had seen while in trance had been nothing more than some wild fantasy.

An off-white sleeping robe fell about his ankles, reminding him of the feel of warm wool, desert sands, and all he had left behind.

Her calling swirled about him again, the Power of



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Air whispering of things she had seen in her lifetime, of people she had loved and lost. And it was as if the voice of his Mate spoke to him. As though he still dreamed of a time long passed. As if it was his beloved's lips that caressed his ear with all she had learned this lifetime.

Running a square-palmed hand through the wavy mass of his hip-length, burnt bark hair, he knew he must find this witch; from curiosity if nothing else. She had done what others had tried to do for many seasons. She had brought him from the depths of his past, to the reality of the present.

He would have to wait and see if he would thank her.

\* \* \* \*

Wading through the breaking waves of the Pacific, the cleansing magic of salt water and all living things surrounded him. Jagur knew of no other way to ease the calling of Beltane other than cold ocean water and hard swimming.

Diving under the breakers, he made it past them to the rolling swells, swimming hard until his muscles burned. Turning on his back, he floated, listening to the steady pounding of his heart; gazing at the stars as his body rocked within the womb of the Mother. Lights from the mansions along the cliff, more like twinkling fairy's light than the harsh beacons of man's technology they represented.

Something with warm, rubbery flesh caressed his leg as it passed beside him in the black water. Its head

breaking the surface as its dorsal fin did, the ever-present smile the Mother had given the dolphin causing his lips to bend in return.

Other heads broke the surface around him, calling out greeting in their high-pitched squeaks and whistles; asking him to play.

It was then he felt the element of Earth as it wove about him, as if carried on the backs of the dolphins easing their snouts against his hand, running the lengths of their rubbery bodies against his flesh as he carefully treaded water.

He was a creature of Earth and Water and had nothing to fear from those who lived within its elements. Yet he had never sensed a Compelling such as this before, bringing to the surface of his soul a need for a place he could call home, children to jump upon him during the early hours of dawn, a woman to claim for his own.

But it was a mortal woman who had cast this spell, and more astonishing, a witch of Power yet unclaimed by the Tribes.

The scent of sun-warmed fur, musk and sage drifted over him, filling him with a single purpose. To find this creature who could call him with such need and claim her before the pack as his. To take her beneath him and plant his seed deep within her while he protected her from all; watching his children grow within her womb as their love nourished them.

Treading water, he shook his head; these were not his thoughts, not his desires, but the wishes of the spell. He was only sixty years old. A mere teenager by Utameer life-spans, and a babe by the Langs!

He'd traveled the world playing rugby and the bodran with a band called Woodruff. Only a little over a decade ago, he had taken over as Na-meer, leader of his pack. He was as far away from settling down as the seas from the stars.

Yet the element of Earth continued to wrap around him, showing him the benefits of a love who was loyal to him; running with him through the woods, sleeping beside him beneath the stars, always there when he needed a hand or a shoulder.

And she would. He didn't know how, but he knew without a doubt she was a Healer, a woman of great passion and loyalty. But she was a witch, and if they were to ever have children, it would have to be with the blessing of the gods. Children between their two kinds could not be born any other way. He would spend the rest of his life protecting them, cherishing them, and when she died, it would destroy him.

Amber eyes searched the midnight sky as the dolphins continued to rub against his muscular form, in both comfort and play, one dolphin going so far as to take a handful of his long ebony hair floating in the water, and giving it a playful tug.

Yet he didn't feel any of it...

Was it worth the pain to hold her within his arms at night, to know the joys of fatherhood and the stability of hearth and home for a few decades? Knowing that he would lose her long before he would find his own death?

The Power surging around him whispered it was. The dolphins agreed with high squeals and acrobatic jumps over his head, for their very existence revolved

around the love of family and play. They could not comprehend a life without it.

Maybe there was more to the family life than he had given credit. He would find this witch who called to him so deeply and see if she was the one who could hold his wild heart.

And accept him for all he was.

## CHAPTER TWO

“**R**aina? Are you up yet?” Raina’s forehead crinkled. A thick haze coated her brain as she tried to remember why someone would be pounding on her door with a sledgehammer at O-dark stupid in the morning.

With the doozy of all hangovers and sprawled beneath layers of blankets and flannel sheets, she couldn’t quite make up her mind on what she needed to do to get them to stop.

“Raina?” Gods, was it Loren?

“Loren? Is the Loft on fire?” The pounding stopped, but her brain still felt like someone had taken it out during the night and replaced it with a wad of chewed-up gum.

“Raina, are you okay? Can I come in?” Come in? Where was she that she needed to ask if she could come in?

“If you’re of good intent....” Years of habit had the words pouring from her mouth before she could ask herself why. She’d known Loren for over a year now and had never said those words to her before.

With teeth-grinding slowness, the ancient brass

knob turned, raking against her skull with a long squeal. Raina swore to herself if the torture would just end, she'd get a new knob this very day...or at least some WD-40.

She could hear the door opening through the numerous layers of fabric, her world encased in flannel and warm fuzzy blankets tossed some time in the night over her head to ward off whatever evil she had been dreaming of.

"Raina?" Loren's footsteps echoed on the hard wood floor as she entered the room, becoming softer, muffled steps as she stepped onto the Persian rugs Raina had rolled out randomly all over her inner sanctuary.

The bed dipping with Loren's weight as she sat down was the only warning Raina got before light assaulted her puffy, sandpaper eyes. The unexpected assault on her fragile eyesight had Raina pulling one of the pillows over her head and cursing the damned morning light for sending knives piercing into her already abused brain.

"I know you're always saying to follow your bliss, Raina, but maybe you shouldn't have followed it quite so much last night."

The amusement in her best friend's voice at Raina's expense brought a low growl out of her throat just before she took the pillow concealing her head and swung it at the cheery one's chest. "Die, evil fiend of sledgehammers, and never curse my doorstep with your sunny disposition again!"

An accursed giggle and footsteps heading for the door let her know she had been taken as seriously as

possible in her hung-over and quite naked state.

Moving locks of hair out of her face with long-fingered hands; she grabbed a large hank of it and tried to make her fingers do what she told them to do. Twirling most of the tangled mass into a bun resting sloppily against the back of her neck; she tried for the maverick strands that had eluded her, before finally giving up with a long sigh.

Running her left hand down her face in more self-disgust than anything else, she eased her legs over the side of the white oak canopy bed and tossed off the covers.

What in Hades had she done last night to be paying this badly for it in the morning?

Scrunching her toes into the rug, she set her feet apart, took a deep breath, and pushed up off the bed. The world swam for a moment like some sick and twisted roller coaster before leveling out, leaving her stomach rolling but intact.

"Hern, I swear to you, as long as I live, I will never again touch a drop of the foul concoction Aunt Lula used to make...if you will have mercy on this poor soul and let me make it to the bathroom without losing last night's dinner all over the rug."

Taking another cleansing breath, she opened her eyes for only a second before closing them against the harsh morning light coming from her windows. Turning her face to the light, she slowly let her eyes adjust behind the protection of their lids, then turned away and opened them again slowly without wincing.

Taking each step with intricate care, she moved

across the bedroom, past the armoire and rocking chair, and into the bathroom.

The cool room instantly eased the ache in her head. The skylight's glass was tinted a deep blue, casting the rest of the room into some sort of underwater world, complete with a huge oval-shaped bath tub long enough for her five-ten frame to stretch out in with room to spare. There was a shower and claw-footed tub in the guest bathroom, but she had always preferred bathing, so had gone and spent some of her inheritance on this one extravagance. Turning to the powder blue slab of a sink and the antique silver mirror hanging over it, she couldn't stop from groaning at the creature looking back at her.

Bloodshot blue-violet eyes, hair looking more like a harpy's than the normal neat braid she kept it in each night; and she could swear there was a greenish tint to her complexion.

"Never. Again." Rubbing a hand over her face, hoping it would clear up the image in the mirror some, she looked at her reflection once again and knew it wasn't going to help.

Turning the right silver handle, she watched as her sink filled up with cold water and dunked her head in.

Yanking her head out a few moments later, her brain now screaming at her from the abuse, she grabbed a cloth from the counter and drenched it as well before scrubbing her face; hoping the friction would take the green tint from her skin and ease the ache behind her eyes.

Standing there, naked as the day she was born and



dripping wet, Raina wasn't sure what kind of karma she had incurred to deserve this kind of torture...unless of course, stupidity had its own kind of debt to be paid...in full.

"If I never lay eyes on Lula's Black Water again, I'll consider myself blessed."

Running the bath, she filled it only a quarter full with steaming water, before easing onto her knees in the deep bathtub and scrubbing herself down with a bar of ginger soap.

Rinsing off, she soaped and conditioned her hair, then bent forward to rinse her hair under the swan-shaped spout jetting warm water against her thigh.

One more quick rinse, and she was feeling less green around the gills and on her way to facing the day.

Grabbing a soft blue towel, she quickly rubbed it over her hair and body as she went back into the bedroom. Wrapping her hair in the towel, she moved to her dresser and grabbed the first thing in each drawer. Bra and undies, both a lilac cotton, an amethyst peasant blouse, and a pair of form-fitting wine button up corduroy hip-huggers.

Once dressed, she hung the towel in the bathroom and ran a brush through her hair. Working out the last of the knots, she once again attempted to wrap her hair into a bun at the base of her neck, but this time succeeded.

Heading back into the bathroom, she brushed her teeth, powdered her underarms, and ran a soft gloss over her lips.

Giving herself the once-over in the mirror, she had

to say she didn't look all that green anymore, and her hair had cleaned up nicely.

Pinching her high cheekbones for some color, she headed through the bedroom and into the hallway before she noted the feel of the rug under her bare feet.

"Damn, I'm not wearing any shoes." Turning around, she opened the door again, slid her henna-marked feet into a pair of beaded, dark brown sandals by the bed, and headed out once again.

Down the Persian rug-covered hallway, past the kitchen and the living room, and out to the rooftop patio. She shaded her eyes with a hand as the full strength of the early morning sun pelted down on her.

Hurrying passed the plants and herb garden, across the roof to the dark purple door with an ancient hex painted in silver on it...to ward off any untoward company and evil spirits. Or the IRS, her Aunt would say, but she wasn't sure about the last one.

Down two flights of shadowed stairs and out into the kitchen of the one and only Kestrel's Loft, a books and oddity store with a little food, music and mysticism to make it her home.

"Loren? What time is it?" She could hear movement around in the front of the store. From the smell of it, Loren had the cooking side under control, and with the smell of baking bread, so too come the patrons.

Walking over the conglomerate stone floor, past the chopping block and two ovens, she parted the

beads hanging down from the doorway, passed the bathroom door, and into what they all referred to as the Sanctuary. Familiar Persian rugs covered the almost black stained hardwood floors; heavy wooden couches with deep red, purple or blue velvet cushions. Deep-seated, overstuffed chairs, coffee tables, and lamps that looked like they came from some eighteenth century bordello – which they had.

But the crowning jewel was the books; walls and walls of them. The dark wood bookshelves ten to twelve feet high held everything from mainstream to the rare and bizarre. Each book lovingly handled by the patrons of the Loft, knowing what a treasure they held within their hands.

Some of them had been passed down generation-to-generation for as far back as the eldest of her family could remember. Some had been recent additions, sort of like her private collection open to viewing by the public.

None of them were for sale, but she had students and researchers coming in all the time. Like a library for the mystic arts, with a little Shakespeare, Plato and a whole lot of others thrown in for spice.

Walking again, she headed through another bead-hanging doorway and into the front room of the Kestrel's Loft.

Windows along the front wall gave a great view of the Dubliner across the street, or the street market the locals held every Thursday.

Most of the room was filled with unstained wooden tables and chairs. Light earth-toned couches, eccentric coffee tables, and a wide assortment of local

art hanging on the walls depicting fairies and dragons, unicorns and all things magical. Ruth Thompson and Michael Parkes were two of her favorite artists. Although they weren't local, the paintings had called to her from the first time she'd seen them at a Ren Fair. Their works rested behind intricately carved wooden frames, with swans and maidens, elves and angels, vampires and Valkyries igniting the viewer's imagination.

To her left was a polished wooden counter where they kept the coffee makers, creamers, cookies, teas, and a tray of what they would be serving for the day. At the far end of the counter by the door was a blackboard to let the patrons know just what was in the food in case any were allergic, and a quote for the day.

Today it said, 'When following one's bliss, make sure you have lots of aspirin.'

"So, what do you think about my words of wisdom?"

And there she stood, the nemesis of all things hung-over.

Oh, but Raina wasn't fooled by Loren's tanned angelic face, or all her platinum blond hair. Oh no, she knew behind her mask lied a dark and sinister creature just waiting to rub Raina's face into her excess of the night before.

Raina knew one had to be careful with such a creature, to catch Loren off guard before she could pounce and leave Loren wallowing in confusion.

Ordering her lips to stretch into a smile, Raina was rewarded by the wary look that crossed over those

ocean-colored eyes and had to shake her head at her own excess from the night before.

"You got me, Loren. And I have already sworn off Black Water into the next ten lifetimes, so no need to drag me through it again."

"Loki's blight! You got foxed on Black Water! The stuff is so sour, I can't abide the smell, let alone the taste of it!"

Raina nodded her head in agreement as she slipped behind the counter. Checking the coffee and tea, she made a swipe at cleaning the spotless counter before leaning against it and looking at the ceiling.

"Well," Raina murmured, "your tongue goes numb after the third shot, so you really can't taste it after that."

Loren's astonished look was worth it. Raina had to make something worth her excess last night, and the awe in her friend's eyes would have to do it.

"How many shots did you have?" Loren whispered.

"I really have no idea, Lore. I'm not even sure what I did last night at ceremony."

"Oh, Raina..."

"I know, I know, never drink and cast. But last night, I don't know what it was that got me in such a funk. For the life of me, it felt like my heart was breaking." Raina heard her friend move before she felt her hand on her shoulder.

"He's not worth it, Raina. No man is." Nodding her head in agreement, Raina grabbed the apron off the counter and tied it around her waist.

"He was my first, Loren, and so far...my only."

The bell jingling on the front door startled them both out of whatever they had been about to say. Letting whatever pain Raina had rest in some dark, silent part of her again, until another time.

"Well, let's get our patrons fed before they mob us." Raina grumped, but ruined her attempt at bitchiness with a grin.

Hurrying over to the door, Raina unlocked it and opened the Loft to the people who had been patiently waiting outside for six a.m.

"Well come all, and enter if ye be of good intent." It was the traditional greeting of the morning, both warding the door for the day against those who would cause harm and letting the many familiar faces know she welcomed them within the Kestrel's Loft.

For now, Raina would have to place whatever she felt last night on the back burner. She had patrons to feed, friends to greet, and the Kestrel's Loft to run for another day.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan rose with the setting sun, the excess of the night before bringing a small groan to his well-kissed lips. He should have risen earlier, but the urge to simply lie in bed and watch the sky change colors over the ocean through the floor-to-ceiling majesty of his bedroom windows had been too tempting.

But the reason for his marathon lovemaking session with Lilly quickly dampened his mellow mood and reminded him why he needed to go out and find this witch who would cast such a

Compelling for him.

Easing out of the huge mahogany four-poster bed, the gold velvet cloth brushed past his body as he parted the drapes on the other side of the bed. His mood didn't change as he prowled around the black marble kitchen floor, looking for something to ease his hunger before he went out.

Snagging some bird-shaped sugar cookies from a basket, he found himself studying the intricate detail of the bird; a hunting bird of some kind. Leo must have left them while he slept, as he'd never seen cookies quite like this before. As he bit into one, he felt the touch of magic roll over his tongue, easing down his throat and settling in his stomach, filling him with a sense of calm and peace.

And Power...

Damned if he wasn't going to have to kick Leo in the ass for giving him spelled food without warning him. It was intricately weaved into the cookie, so skillfully he wouldn't even have noticed it before hand unless he had been looking for it.

Whoever had made these cookies was a master at their Craft. He would need to locate the witch that made them after he had found the one that had cast the Compelling. The Loyal and other Lang at Haven would love cookies filled with Power...he only hoped that the baking witch was not sworn to the Utameer yet.

Or he might have to steal the witch. Which could be an amusement in and of itself. Yes, perhaps he hoped that the witch was sworn...both of them...to the Utameer. It would make a few days worth of his

existence a little less monotonous.

The Lang snagged un-Awakened Utameer all the time; the Loyals ranks were chock-full of them. But to snag a witch, two witches, of such Power, from beneath the Utameer's all-to-sensitive noses...that would be a game worth playing!

Going back to the bedroom, he went into the bathroom, not really seeing anything around him as he focused on getting to the shower and doing a Cleansing. Padding across white marble slabs interlaced with bloodstone, he walked past the sink carved out from a great chunk of clear quartz, past the steps up to the marble, sunken tub and over to the corner of the bathroom where he'd had a separate shower put in for just such an occasion. When he wanted the water to pound down on his skin, to clear his head, and cleanse his body.

Opening the misted glass door, he stepped in and turned the two black dials, one for heat, one for pressure, adjusted it to his satisfaction, and ran a hand in front of the sensor by the door twice. Jets of water came shooting out of two walls; another jet, just higher than his head, blinked, waiting for him to move into its sensor's range to start.

Touching his muscled shoulder, he wasn't surprised to find the jagged bite mark gone, as well as the scratches. But Lilly's energy still lingered over him like a musky perfume.

Taking in a deep breath, he pulled all of Lilly's residual Power coating his shields, deep within his core; feeding the creature within him that could only gain true sustenance from another's Power. Lapping



up the sexual haze like a lion licking its cheek of blood.

Aidan shook himself lightly before stepping forward. The waiting showerhead turned on, and he stuck his head under the water. His lion-colored hair only slightly darker as it got wet, running down to mid back. Closing his now calm, slate-blue eyes against the water, he breathed in the scent of the spell from the night before, its magic still easing around him as he cleansed his mind and spirit for the day.

Sage and sandalwood, cinnamon and wormwood, this witch had combined the earthy and the sacred, the elements with the blessings of the gods.

Feeling himself begin to harden, he separated his mind from his body as he traced the path of the magic to its caster. But the trail was erratic, weaving within castings of others, going to the four directions, merging, and separating a thousand times.

Shit.

The only way for him to find her was to let the spell pull him to her; let it guide his feet and his will to her side. Placing lightly golden hands against the white marble and bloodstone wall, he pulled his awareness away from his body and focused on his Cleansing.

*Lord and Lady, elements of Air and Fire, which all was and will be magical has risen from, erase the darkness about my body, lift away all which is not of your blessing and prepare me for the battles to come. May my enemies whither and die upon my sword, may my allies be blessed with your protection. Let me hear the truth within lies; let me feel the fire of all creation burn brightly within those I*

*may call friend. Wash away the chaos, so I may see with a clear mind what you wish of me. As you will it, so mote it be.*

Turning off the water, he opened the door and grabbed a fluffy burgundy towel from a shelf in the wall. Wrapping his head in one of the towels to help his hair dry, he grabbed another towel and headed for the bedroom.

Aidan dried his chest as he walked into the bedroom. Began rubbing down his arms as he passed the bed older than the sailing of Columbus. And was working on his back and firm buttocks as he strolled into a walk-in closet you could park two trucks in and still have room for the mountain of clothes.

Running his hand over the wall sensor made the closet illuminate with a soft light as he stared at racks and shelves of clothes, half of which he couldn't remember buying...he'd have to ask Leo what in Hades he'd been doing. It looked like he'd gone and bought out J-Crew and Kate's entire stock of all things leather again.

Walking along one wall, he took a form-fitting, cream-colored V-neck sweater off a padded hanger and threw it haphazardly over forty feet onto the bed in the other room. Walking over to the next wall, he pulled some faded button-fly Levi's off a hanger, and they quickly landed near the sweater. Landing on the bed next were some cream silk boxer-briefs and matching cotton socks from a mahogany drawer near his head.

Grabbing the brown Doc Martins from the shoe rack, he tossed them onto the floor near the clothes

and headed back to the bathroom to finish his grooming. Why it seemed he gave a damn about what this witch thought of his appearance, when truthfully, he could make her see him as anything he wished...but then again, if she was half the witch he thought she was, she'd be able to see a glamour from a mile away.

Removing the towel from his head and dropping it on the floor, he grabbed an intricately carved antique silver brush off the counter and pulled it quickly through his hair. It would take forever to dry naturally...

Focusing on his image in the mirror, he saw the hot air bend the reflection in front of him as a warm wind blew through his hair, tossing it lightly, and drying it within a few seconds. It took so little ability, it could hardly be called wasting his Power. Then again, who would chide him for it?

Running the brush through his hair a final time, he left it unbound to fall thick and slightly wavy down his back.

By the time he was heading out of the Towers, the sky was turning shades of violet and ruby, the spell's call urging him to pick up speed, pulling him toward the street market on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

Walking at a human's pace, he kept to the ever increasing shadows as he crossed the street, over 3<sup>rd</sup> and onto 4<sup>th</sup>. She was only a few blocks from his penthouse, and it would take forever to find a parking spot downtown, especially the Gaslamp District, no matter what time of day. When he reached the south side of the market, he could sense

her at the north end. There couldn't be two witches in the same vicinity with so much Power tightly constrained against her in one bright, luminescent ball. Standing there, he could feel her spell seeping into his pores and setting his blood on fire. No, it could only be her.

He stopped for a moment in front of the Dubliner, his sense of her torn in two as he looked across the street at the crowded shop there. Searching above the door, he could see a carved wooden sign reading 'The Kestrels' Loft' in silver letters. It was her store; he knew it as surely as he knew the sun would rise. He must have passed it a thousand times, but he'd never noticed it.

Shaking his head at her ability to cloak her presence all this time, he kept walking toward the far end of the market. He knew from personal experience, you didn't want to confront a witch in her place of Power.

Easing past the stalls being taken down and the last-minute shoppers, he felt her stop, joined by another Practitioner of almost equal Power, and then a sadness fell over her.

Damn the spell, he'd had enough pain in his life; he didn't need hers as well.

Hitting a magical wall, he felt his breath catch as he thoughtlessly turned, his eyes adjusting to the bright colors of a rainbow-colored stall with two women behind it.

They both held Power, and they both were old souls...

As he stared at the dark-haired woman in the

## TWILIGHT CALLING

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amethyst peasant blouse, the spell eased about him, its task completed. It had brought him to her, for better or worse. The anger riding him since the night past eased as a stronger, more recognizable emotion took hold. The desire he felt spring to life within him had nothing to do with the spell, and everything to do with her...

## CHAPTER THREE

“Loren, it’s almost dusk, and the market is going to start closing down soon. Are you good if I take off for half an hour and get what we’ll need for the next week from Fala?”

The Loft had been packed all day. Finals were coming up at all of the colleges and the high schools, so the library was packed with student aides grading papers. Graduate students touching up the research on their theses and the random high school student who was doing a paper on the mystic arts...which, since the movie 'The Craft' came out a few years ago, had been more than less. The street market also brought in a load of random people that had smelled the food, or the coffee and teas brewing. Or had never heard of the Loft before and came in to see just what it was.

Placing five of their kestrel-shaped sugar cookies on a plate with a mug of rosehip tea, Loren looked around the front room for some friends. Grinning, she saw a dark blond head in the crowd sitting on the couch with a few of her friends, and waved her over.

“Not a problem, Raina, Melody can help me at the

counter.” Loren replied as she waved at Melody to get her attention.

Raina nodded. She liked the smiling beauty that Loren hung out with at the Dubliner. Nodding her head in thanks to Melody, she took off the apron around her waist and gave it to her as they passed each other by the counter. Returning waves to a few of the patrons, Raina headed for the kitchen and the wicker basket she used for holding what she bought from the market.

The library was filled to capacity; some people had gone to sitting on the floor, using their knees as a table to lean their notepads and books on. Others were squished five or six to a couch that was only meant to seat four, but from their smiles of greeting, she didn’t think that they minded all that much.

Smiling back, she hurried to the kitchen, grabbed her basket off the chopping block and was out the back door, through the walled patio to the back gate. Closing the wooden gate firmly behind her, she hurried down the shadowed alley, cut between the buildings, and back to 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

It was a little past six already, and she knew the only reason that Fala would still be there was because she was waiting for Raina. Fala didn’t like to be in the Gaslamp after dusk, and by the deep red and purples of the sky, it was already past that.

Fala was somewhere between twenty and sixty. Her prematurely silver hair framed a face the color of light coffee and dark caramel eyes. It was the eyes that made her seem older than her other features, as if they had seen more than any thirty-or-so-year-old

could ever lay claim to.

From what Raina could gather, she'd grown up in Louisiana, spent most of her years in New Orleans, with her family home being just passed Bayou Savage in Lacombe, right outside Slidell.

Raina had been to the French Quarter back in '98 and it was there that she'd been touched by a ghost. Physically touched, a warm finger sliding lightly down the back of her arm. She had sensed the spirits her entire life, but never had one gifted her with its touch. She'd been standing in the middle of the artifact room of the Voodoo Museum, deep in the heart of the Quarter. It was almost like a feather had brushed against her. She'd turned, thinking she'd bumped into something, but everything was against the walls and she was dead center in the middle of the room. Nothing could have reached her.

She'd thrown out her senses, seeking the spirit, and she'd felt a hand placed upon the top of her head like a parent would her child. A comforting gesture that she had needed, for she still grieved the loss of her aunt just a year prior. Maybe that was what the spirit was trying to let her know, that she was not alone. That her aunt was not truly gone, just traveling on a path that Raina could not follow.

Some people asked her how she could believe in something that she had never seen with the physical eye. But how could she not believe when every other sense she had confirmed their existence? Every cell in her being simply knowing what was true; having felt them since she was a child...and luckily, never running in to one of ill will. She knew they were out



there. As there were spirits who were of good intent, there also were spirits of dark intent who roamed this plane. She did not fear them, but she did pity them, for they were more lost than any shipwrecked creature could ever be.

Fala and Raina were of one mind when it came to the spirit world. Keep your karma clean and your shields up, and the darker things would leave you well enough alone.

Skirting around stalls and open booths that were packing up for the night, she hurried across the block to the north side where Fala always set up her rainbow-colored stall.

The sky was multiple shades of purple by the time she got there. The street shadowed by the taller buildings, black against the already slipping sun.

"Fairy chil'! I wasn't sure if you'd be comin' to see Fala before I got packed up for the night."

Flashing Fala a quick grin, Raina moved around the table, hugging one of her mentors as Fala's bright red dress flapped about her hourglass frame in the quickening breeze. "And miss the latest gossip about what man you've snagged with your cookin' in that cauldron of yours, Fala?"

Grinning, the woman she had known for over ten seemingly ageless years squeezed her about the waist.

"Hush now, chil', you know the only thing I use my spellin' for nowadays is for tellin' fortunes down on the Bay."

"I know it, Fala, and a better teacher I've never had."

"Sure 'nough." Searching under the stalls table,

Fala grabbed a brown potato sack filled to near the top with hard-to-order spices and herbs that Raina had yet to find the knack to grow. Some had the green thumb; they could make avocados grow in Alaska if they wished it. Raina was good enough at watering and talking with them, but the green thumb wasn't one of her gifts. It had been her mother's...

Fala put down the sack and took her young prodigy into her arms, letting Raina lean her head against Fala's shorter frame as she took a deep, cleansing breath. Sometimes, the simple touch of another who had shared your pain could ease the emptiness for a while...but if that was true, why were so many in the big city so lonely?

"Here now, chil', there will be no dark thoughts on this night. Not with him looking at you so intently and all that." Startled by the older woman's words, she looked across the street in the same direction as Fala.

Lady's Love, he was beautiful. Even standing in shadows, she could sense the beauty of him, radiating like some elfin prince from the fairy tales of her childhood.

But why in Lady's name was he looking at her so intensely? Had they met...? No, she would never forget his aura, not in a thousand years. It radiated around him like a wave of colored heat, swirling and changing from one shade to the next.

Energy flared up around him as she continued to watch, blurring the colors of his aura to a neutral gray. Only one kind of person had walls of force like that, another Practitioner.

"Who is he, Fala?"

"Lands sake, chil', I don' know! Why don't you go over there and ask him?"

The mischief in her old friend's voice had her looking down into the shorter woman's twinkling caramel eyes, boding nothing but trouble..."What have you done, Fala?"

Patting the younger woman's shoulder, all Fala could seem to do was contain a huge smile from splitting her face in half. "If'n I were you, I'd be asking what you yourself has done," Fala said softly.

"What have I done, Fala?"

"That would be a good question." The sound of his voice beside Raina's right ear startled her, causing her to jerk away from him, bumping into the stacked boxes that Fala had been packing up for the night and knocking some of them to the ground. Loki's Blight!

Rosehips, woodruff, black sage, lion's mane, and black root all scattered in their neatly tied bundles across the sidewalk. The dried sage's scent wafted up to caress her face, reminding her of the ritual she performed last night, if not the content.

Turning to glance at the stranger she was sure was only inches from her, she was surprised to note that he was more than an arm's length...but she could have sworn...

"Lady love it!" Raina mumbled, giving the stranger a dark look for making her jump like a teenage girl in a B-rated horror. She forgot what her senses had told her just the moment before and plugged into him.

"What in all that's magic do you think you're doing coming up like that? We are downtown. It's

fraggin' twilight. I could have used a tazer on you for all you know!"

"A tazer?"

He put just enough disbelief and mocking into that question to make Raina's hackles rise; as if something as insignificant as Fala and herself were beneath his worry...intentional on his part or not. "You know, Fala, it's attitudes like that that make me content to be single."

Aidan let his lips curl slightly upward in amusement before taking a step toward her.

Raina had to fight the urge to match him with a step back, something instinctively not wanting this man anywhere near her.

"And just how content are you?" Aidan asked so softly, she almost didn't hear him.

Glancing between Fala and the blond stranger, Raina noted that her mind had her wanting to run back to the Loft at top speed... but the humor that sparkled in Fala's warm caramel eyes and the amused mockery in his had her wondering who had given out the scripts to this scene and forgotten hers.

"Content enough..." Raina replied stubbornly.

She turned her back on the stranger and went to her knees, grabbing the tied herbs before a sudden wind could pick them up and blow them further away. Calling herself a jumpy fool, she stacked the bundles by her knees and tried to ignore the vibration of Power that wilted against her shields.

The brown Doc Martins registered first. Then looking up, she noted the faded button-fly Levi's.

"Land's sake, boy! Never did see no one move that

fast this side of the Mississippi!"

Fala's startled exclamation had Raina's gaze jerking back to Fala. But there wasn't a trace of fire in Fala's caramel gaze; just a touch of wonderment, and a bit of fascination. Aidan noted the Creole woman's expression, and he couldn't help himself...he smiled.

"Oooh, it must be the Trickster hisself standin' 'for me with a smile like that!" Fala whispered as she touched the silver medallion at her neck.

Shaking her head at Fala's words, Raina was reaching for the last bundle of herbs when she felt him move over her, his elegant hands wrapping around the sage, while his other extended to her with a natural grace of movement that any ballerina would envy.

Gazing at the palm in front of her face, she noted the square-tipped, slender slant of his long fingers, but more importantly, she saw the lines imbedded within it. The one arcing beneath four fingers was the love line, long and well scrolled within the palm. Connecting with the line beneath that was the Power line, which sometimes touched with the line that wraps around the thumb, his life line. And it was that line that caught her attention, or better yet, both of his life lines.

Raising her gaze to his face, she cricked her neck back at the oddest angle to do so while crouching on the ground. Looking up at his shadowed face, Raina wondered if there was any metaphysical reason the streetlight turned his hair into a golden nimbus of light about his head. If it was his Power that created the halo of light.

"You have an extra line." Raina could sense his puzzlement at her words, then as understanding dawned, she felt more than saw him withdraw from her as he placed his hand back at his side. His energy pulled back behind walls so high, she knew she'd never be able to climb them.

She'd seen it before, others with the strong auras that had an extra line either above their love line, or between their life and fate line, as deeply embedded as the Grand Canyon. But she had never mentioned it before. Just silently wondered why only those who were aware of their gifts had this extra line, and all of them seemed to be Practitioners, while all of her coven didn't have one. Was it a sign of belonging to one group? Was there some way to add a line that didn't appear to be the work of a blade, but birth?

Forgetting her startled anger as quickly as she'd felt it, her curiosity rose over the barrier she had begun erecting around herself and had her sending out a feeler of magic. Wondering what it was about this man that had her instantly testy and out of sorts. Normally she was good-humored and easygoing, bending with her patrons many moods like a reed in a stormy breeze...yet not with him.

Feeling him ease toward her, then away, she knew, as she knew the moon would rise, that he would cause her nothing but chaos, and most would be painful if she didn't guard her heart now, before it was lost to her forever.

But as her Aunt Lula used to say, chaos is the pepper of all life. One can't know any true pleasure without risking true pain.

But she had seen enough pain this lifetime, had her heart kicked and stomped on by the best of deceivers, like some drunken dancer whirly cavorting to an ancient jig. She didn't need any more spice, or the chaos. She wanted something low-burning and long-lasting. Not blazing bright to blind you from the pit ahead and the ultimate pain of the landing.

No, she'd dislike this man now and be done with it. For she could dislike him before or after the heartbreak, and if it were all the same to her emotions, she'd prefer the former.

Oh, but goddess, he was a lovely one...

Setting her course with a mulish determination, she focused on the shadows that filled his face as they surely did her protesting heart.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan felt it as he stood over her. A touch of magic, like a feather drifting softly across his soul and easing between cracks in his armor that he had never known existed. Whispering to him of possibilities with endless heartache or timeless glory. It would be one or the other with this woman, and for just a breath it scared the hell out of him. Made him want to run back to a mother who was long dead, but kept alive in the memory of her only and beloved son.

He felt his breath catch at the true regret that filled her beautiful blue eyes. But calling them blue would be like calling Scarlotti some guy who played the pianoforte, or Turandot a play with a bunch of singers in it, never seeing the depth or complexity beneath

them.

They were the purple of twilight before the moon rose, ringed by the blue of water that crashed against white sandy beaches...and to see them in distress pulled at emotions he had long avoided.

What had she been thinking as she'd gazed up at him, eyes hardening one moment then turning dark and moist as a peat bog in spring with the decision he'd seen finalize in those violet depths? If any had passed him by on the street as he gazed at her while he was unaware, would they have seen such indecision in his gaze? Hardening to a desire that burned like a beacon in his sky eyes, drowning out the whispered words of experience that had kept him alive so far this lifetime?

Extending his hand to her again, this time, palm down, he watched her body as it slowly leaned forward, her long fingered hand slipping into his and pushing downward as she rose. The copper of some Native American in her ancestry, mingling with the tan of his own Celtic skin, tinged a light gold in his travels.

\* \* \* \*

When skin touched skin, Raina felt the overwhelming notion of the familiar, as if she'd been living her life for just this day, and this stranger. The sense of homecoming was so strong, her lips bent in a crooked smile. White teeth flashing up to Aidan, having no idea what a sight they made to those passing; appearing as if she was performing a deep curtsy



before some ancient royalty.

His answering upturn of lips was unplanned and immediate, spreading across his lips and leaving Raina absolutely speechless. Her heartbeat stopped for just that stunned moment, then picked up at double speed as he helped her to her feet.

No man should be allowed to look that beautiful; it just wasn't fair to the rest of the men out there. He brought to mind paintings with Michelangelo's angels as they flew across the ceiling of a great cathedral. Of what a Greek or Roman must have seen if they had ever beheld Apollo. The very perfection of his face, from the eyes that tilted slightly at the corners to the shallow cleft in his chin, it was as if she gazed upon...a glamour.

It had to be glamour; no mortal man could look like this. But even recognizing the illusion for what it must be, it didn't fade as it should have. Was this his gift, that of illusion? And why would he waste such a spell on her, a stranger who meant nothing to him?

Raina concentrated on disbelieving the spell, but his image did not fade, the Power of his aura did not lessen. She cast her gaze past his shoulder, so that she only saw him through the corner of her vision, and focused on the feel of the solid concrete beneath her feet, the warm breeze wafting past her neck...the sound of her heart pounding against her rib cage?

Both Fala and Raina felt his aura contract about him, dimming the radiating light and tingling against their skin. Leaving what could only be explained as white noise to those that couldn't hear it. Sort of like the low hum of a fan, where you don't really notice

the noise until it's turned off.

When Raina cast her gaze directly on him once again, it was simply a face. A truly beautiful image, with eyes the shade of storm-swept seas...but still just a face.

Looking down, she quickly took her hand from his and firmly reminded herself of the decisions that had been made, and how she didn't have time in her life for a man such as this. Beautiful men were the worst of the lot, for they knew what they were and used it to their sole advantage...most of the time, at the expense of others. But damned if she still didn't want to sway into his arms and...and...and what, you silly twit? If the gods had planned on her having a mate, they wouldn't have sent one that set off every warning bell, that made her want to bitch him up one side and down the other...and lay at his feet in thanks, all at the same time!

She prided herself on control. It was the one thing that she had never lost... until last night. She had to get back to the Loft and find out what she had done last night that was giving her worse mood swings than the most abysmal PMS ever had.

"I have to get back. The Loft is packed and Loren is waiting for me." Easing backward onto the sidewalk, she took a few steps more before taking her eyes from the beautiful stranger and glancing at Fala.

"I'll see you next week?" Raina asked.

Fala just nodded; maybe with all those years she'd seen, she could recognize the hidden panic in her young friend's face. Nodding, Fala made a shooing motion with her hands, and then Raina was off,

tearing down the street at a full out run.

Running from what, she had no idea, but everything in her told her to run and to run hard until she got back to the safety of the Kestrel's Loft, and the empty bed that waited for her upstairs...

\* \* \* \*

Aidan felt what she was doing as her shields grounded and her eyes went slightly out of focus. It took him a moment to realize what he was doing, feeling the magic that he was radiating bounce against her shields and roll back against him. Throwing up shields that must have fallen when he had smiled, he gathered his Power around him and grounded it as well.

Damn, but he hadn't meant to do that. It had been decades since he had been caught off guard. Having his barriers drop so completely by a simple smile from some lovely, lilac-eyed witch...maybe too long.

Aidan watched her run from him, or maybe from herself. For just a moment, there had been a connection between them, as she took his hand, her palm held firmly against his flesh. It was something he'd seen in her eyes that made him wonder if it was his presence that had her pausing down the street, to take off her sandals before she continued to flee down the sidewalk. Or if it was something within the witch, urging her to flee fast and hard, back to her sanctuary.

"She's a good girl, my Rainfall. Best Healer I ever have met, and stronger than most of them put together. But you having the mark and all, you'd be

knowin' that."

Aidan just stood there for a moment and watched the beautiful Creole woman with the old eyes as she gathered her herbs from the table and placed them in boxes on the ground. She knew what the extra line meant; yet she'd said nothing to her young friend.

"The first and last time I saw a Practitioner such as yourself, I'd been nothing more than twenty, reading palms on the streets of N'awlins." Carefully putting away the rest of the herbs on display, she kept one eye on him and the other on her work.

"If'n you ever come across a man named Evan, you give him my regards." She'd turned fully to him while she said those last words, and the sadness he saw melting in her misting eyes told him without words that she'd read more than his palm all those years ago. And he'd left, as they always did, and he'd taken her heart with him. From the looks of it, he still held it.

Turning back to her herbs, she finished gathering the bags and placed them in one of the numerous boxes by her feet.

When she finished filling one, he picked it up, set it in the cart she was loading them into, and went back to her. Waiting for her to fill another box and tell him more of the witch that he now knew had not set a Compelling on him, but for someone. It was the magic that had chosen him last night instead of another.

"Her daddy died when she was just a baby; and her mother, when she was twenty, and then her Aunt Lula went to the other side a few years past. She's

been holed up in that shop ever since, like some creature hibernatin' through the winter, waitin' for spring."

"And you think I can bring on the first thaw?" Aidan didn't know why he'd said it. Blessed Shadows! He didn't know why he'd done anything since that damned elemental found him last night.

But Fala seemed pleased that he'd understood what she was saying and let him know it by giving him a white-toothed smile and handing him Raina's bag of herbs and wicker basket.

"Why don't you go on down to her shop and give her these herbs? Tell her she can pay me next time." Then Fala shooed him off, much as she'd done with Raina a few minutes ago, her bright red sundress flapping around her body with the motion. It reminded him of a bullfighter waving the red cape at the bull, daring him to proceed.

Touching her hand for a moment, he saw the raven-haired beauty that she'd been, and for the first time in his long life felt the urge to apologize for another's actions. Bringing her hand to his lips, he brushed her knuckles lightly.

"Evan is a fool, Fala, and I think he now knows what he lost." Catching her quick hitch of breath, he asked himself if he would be leaving Raina in the same condition, giving her nothing but a memory and regrets.

For the love of all things magical, he didn't know. But he'd learned long ago that if you don't try, you'd spend the next some odd decades wondering 'what if?'

Setting the herbs within the basket, he turned and headed at a more leisurely pace down the sidewalk, knowing where she'd gone, giving her time to catch her breath before she'd feel the urge to run again. And he knew without a doubt that she would indeed be running from him...cursing him, throwing things at him, ruining the day she ever met him. Well, at least until he had her lying content and spent beside him, running his hand through her dark hair, listening to her breathe as she slept.

And it was with that pleasant thought that he realized, for one reason or another, the thought of chasing her didn't bother him in the least...he was actually looking forward to it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Taking the same route back to the Loft as she'd first come to the market, she peeled out of the alley, flinging herself against the wooden gate of their stone patio as she pulled the handle and throwing it inward.

Two people were sitting on one of the stone benches by the fountain, their startled gazes finding hers as the gate banged up against the inner wall.

"Raina? Doll, are you okay?"

Mickey. Adopted little brother and fencing instructor stood as she leaned against the closed gate, unconsciously reaching for the basket she had forgotten and sighing in frustration at losing it.

Melody had been sitting beside him, her blond head bent toward his as they'd shared a laugh. Mickey's dark blond hair was cut just above his shoulders, two lighter locks in front framing a pair of good-natured sky eyes that often saw too much.

Nodding toward them, she took a deep breath and told her heart to slow, her pulse to ease.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just got spooked by something in the alley, is all." Mickey stood and walked over to

her. She could feel him fling his senses over the wall and into the alley, searching for what had set her off.

"Do you want me to go check it out...?" Taking his hand, she rubbed her cheek against it in familiar affection, shaking her head at his request.

"No, it was nothing, probably just the wind." Raina mumbled as she straightened out her clothing.

"Since when," Melody asked, "does the wind make you run like a small child in a dark room?" Melody stood as she spoke, the protector in her watching over the younger Healer; she knew that something had truly scared Raina, could smell it on her skin like a strong perfume

Melody lifted her head, scenting the soft breeze that blew over the wall. She could swear she smelled...

"Raina..." Mickey began, his tone letting her know he wasn't going to easily let this go.

She loved Mickey, but sometimes...

"No, truly, both of you, I'm fine." Raina insisted, consciously raising her voice and making sure her tone was firm.

Easing away from the gate, Raina felt the tips of her hair brush against the back of her arms. The small, silver fairy bell clanged softly as it rolled across her back within the loose locks. She'd have to braid it this time before going into the Loft, a kind of meditation. With each lock bound within the other, her mind would ease, her aura would ground, and her control would return to her.

She could sense that neither Mickey nor Melody believed her, but from what she could hear coming



from inside the Loft, they were busier than when she'd left, and she needed to get back inside. But knowing these two, they would ride her all over the front room until she locked herself away upstairs.

Well, Mickey was a Taurus; count on the Bull to come out at the most inconvenient times.

Easing away from the gate, she straightened to her full height, gave them each a cool glance, and motioned her hands for them to go back inside. When both of them stayed where they were, she stared down first one, then the other. Until their eyes slowly dropped to the stones at their feet.

Both of them recognized that the Healer was pulling rank, and Raina would not discuss what had startled her any further...for now.

Each taking a step back, they nodded their heads once, turned, and disappeared silently into the shadows of the hallway beyond the kitchen.

Raina knew she had been high-handed, but she would apologize for it later. It wasn't often that she would use an icy gaze to get her way, but it was even rarer for her to lose control, and never had she let someone see it...until today.

To have so forgotten the lessons that Aunt Lula had drilled into her as a child, the slight distance that one must always keep between herself and everyone else, so that such as just happened would not...

She had seen what a broken heart had done to her mother, and had sworn she would rather live her life without a mate than chance the life-altering pain of losing one.

Easing down on the recently vacated stone bench,

she closed her eyes and began to run her fingers through her tangled hair. Feeling her heartbeat begin to slow as she eased into a trance, letting her fingers move as they would...

*Tower of the South, Fire...*

\* \* \* \*

Aidan didn't know what to expect when he walked through the doorway of the Kestrel's Loft, but the spell of warding was no surprise. As he passed under the bells that hovered right inside the door from the ceiling, their light tinkling somehow soothed the tension in his shoulders that he hadn't been aware of until it was gone.

It was the rush of Power that surrounded him, probed him for his intent, and then leaving as invisibly as it had come that caught him off-guard.

What in Hades had that been?

Could she have called into existence the mystical—and some said mythical—Construct? A creation of a powerful magic user, where each element and a piece of the caster's soul were weaved together to create a sentient being without a body. An entity that had never lived before the casting, but pulled from the ethereal and by the iron will of a witch?

Stepping to one side so the woman coming up behind him could enter the Loft, he stood there for a moment and let his senses flow outward. Quickly he noted a large number of other Practitioners were here as well by the way they glowed like a halogen light. Compared to the dimmer light of those that had

either repressed or buried their gifts so deeply that they were barely a spark on the magical radar. Their faded, muddy auras were filled with the turbulent colors of those that had no love for themselves or the gift of all Creation surrounding them.

Most of the repressed he had seen more than once at Haven, hanging on the shoulders of Evan or Clio with an infatuated desperation, the pleading in their eyes to have a Lang's embrace almost embarrassingly open for all to see.

But it was the scent of great possibilities that turned his head toward a Healer sitting with a younger girl at a table just a few feet away.

The Healer was with a lost creature whose shadowed aura barely registered within the realm of the living. The worry lines on the Healer's face, the pain in her brown eyes, reminded him of the look he'd seen in a pair of violet eyes before she'd run from him. He was walking past their table toward the next beaded doorway before he was aware he had told his feet to move.

Touching the young girl as he passed on her lace-clad shoulder, her dyed ebony hair and powder-pale skin were such a sharp contrast to the warm hazel eyes that looked up at him in surprise. His gaze must have mirrored hers; for it wasn't often he touched the broken ones. Empathy was one of his stronger gifts, and the pain that flowed over him as he stopped beside this lost child reminded him more sharply than any dim aura that he did not want this.

But there was something in her earth-tone eyes that sparkled with the light of Power...of running beneath

a full moon with the pack, of belonging, of crying each dark moon in a pool of tepid bath water and not knowing why.

“Lost one, your family waits for you to join them.” Damn the urging, but he had said the words, and the light within her gaze flared as her gift recognized them with an innate understanding, even if she did not. She would soon enough.

And with the Awakening of her Uta, he felt her Power flare in all directions, causing those sensitive enough to feel it to turn and nod their heads in her direction in welcome. Others were left cringing at the blast of raw energy, pushing hands to temples to somehow ward off the wave as it hit them without benefit or knowledge of shields.

The next thing Aidan felt was the group that had gathered outside the front of the Dubliner across the street. One in particular he recognized, the one they called their Na-meer, their Freyr.

With black hair flowing around his broad shoulders in the breeze, and the amber of his eyes glowing from the light of the lamps that lined the street, Aidan could mistake him for no other than their furry leader.

The young Goth must have sensed them as well, because she pushed back from the table and unsteadily gained her feet. Her black-rimmed eyes locked on those she could see standing silently across the street...like calling to like.

Aidan took a step away from the girl, who could have been no more than sixteen if she was a day, and watched as she glanced once to the Healer, then

turned and slowly started to move toward the door.

What had once been a room full of chatting and laughter had now become silent. Even the numb felt the change in the room and looked about them in confusion for what had caused the sudden void of sound.

Aidan stood there silently as well, knowing that he should not have done what he had. It had not been his place. But as he watched her hesitantly step onto the asphalt, the others stopped the few cars driving by as they met her in the middle of the street and took her literally within their fold. The sound of her sobbing against one of the women's shoulders reached him as another patted her back. The lost-one still didn't understanding what she was or who they were, but soon enough, she would know she was finally home.

Shaking his head, Aidan closed himself off from her and was stunned to note that his vision had become cloudy with moisture. As he looked around the room, he noted that the other empaths in the room were also weeping to some degree, not from pain, but from the pure joy that radiated from that lost girl and those that surrounded her, having one of their own returned to them.

"Thank you...I don't know what just happened..." The Healer who had been sitting at the able with girl began.

"You haven't lost her, Healer; she's home."

"Yes, she's come back to us, hasn't she?" Aidan felt his lips curl upward at that naïve statement, but nodded his head all the same.

If she didn't know, then none would tell her.

"Yes, Healer, she's come back to us."

And as if on cue, the people around them began talking again, if not laughing. With more than one head resting against a shoulder as they continued to feel wave after wave of joy flow from those that were now leaving the street and heading inside the Dubliner; their newly found sister walking snugly between two members of her family.

Only one stayed outside the pub as the others walked past him, his amber eyes hidden in the shadows of the building.

Aidan saw him nod his head all the same, recognizing the favor they now owed him for his help in returning one of their own.

Nodding his own head in recognition, Aidan knew that he would some day call upon that favor. Knew it bone-deep and soul-weary.

Turning back toward the beaded doorway that led into the next room...the room that had whispered to him from across the street of Power and history...he parted the multicolored beads and noted the large crowd of Practitioners.

To many witnesses...

Focusing his intent, he cast a spell upon those in the two rooms, touching each of their minds, hazing the past few minutes into nothing of importance, from one heartbeat to the next.

All but the Uta who glared at him through the beaded doorway from behind the counter in the first room. Her shields faded her aura until she was almost invisible to his Third eye. Well, his intent had been to

fog the minds of the unknowing mortals, not one of the Tribes.

And he was definitely not welcome here...

Giving the Uta a single, slow nod of his head through the beaded doorway, he knew that she was not his equal in Power, but among her own, she held rank.

Noting the other Utameer that were sprawled among the humans and witches that felt his passing even if they didn't know why, he made a mental note to find out more about this domicile.

Moving further into the book-lined room, Aidan felt the draw of the books on their shelves and the spells that had been placed both upon and within them.

There was a large red velvet chair in the far corner that called to him, and as he walked toward it, the young man who had been sitting there rose and headed toward the front room. Not knowing why, he was suddenly craving a fresh cup of coffee.

As he passed the black oak bookshelf set against the wall, his left hand moved lightly along the spines, pulling first one, then a second from the shelf without looking at them. The third book waited for him in the chair, the residue of old Power easing from the open pages, calling to him like a familiar tune.

Placing the two books he'd taken on the table beside the arm of the chair, he carefully picked up the leather-bound book and sat, his eyes pouring over words he had read as a child, and was taken back to a time when his mother had been alive, breathing lightly against the back of his head as they slept, her

arm curled about his waist, holding him to her even in dreams...

\* \* \* \*

Raina came back to her surroundings with the scent of sandalwood and cinnamon drifting on the evening air. The small stone courtyard filled with the shadows of early evening, with yet no stars to brighten the waters of the tinkling fountain behind her.

"Raina?" She could sense Loren standing in the doorway to the kitchen, patiently waiting for her to come fully from the trance.

Touching her tightly braided hair that was now wrapped around her head like a dark crown, she rose and made a few unnecessary swipes at her wine-colored cords.

"Yes, Loren, I'm coming." Raina had always had exceptional night vision, and the worried look on her friend's face was as plain as if it were morning.

"I'm all right, Loren, it's just been one of those days." Easing past her into the kitchen, she turned when she noted that her friend still stood by the doorway, her eyes skimming the shadows.

"Tell me about it. I just saw the damndest thing..." Raina raised an eyebrow at that remark. Loren didn't faze easily, and from the sound of it, Raina had missed a once in a lifetime opportunity while she was out on the patio.

"And?" Loren glanced back over her shoulder, shrugged, and turned back to her friend.

"You had to be there." Loren hedged.



"Hmm, okay then...well, come on, we'd better get back to the front room before they take off with all the sugar cookies again." Raina said with a mock sigh.

"Do you smell cinnamon?" Loren's voice was soft and kind of vague as she spoke, her mind seemingly a million miles away.

Walking back to Loren, she touched her shoulder, whispering a chant of Easing, and felt her friend relax against her hand, then turn, and shake her head.

"Odd. From sunrise to twilight, it's just been an all-around odd day." Loren murmured to no one in particular.

Raina nodded her head in agreement, silently hoping as they both walked toward the lights and noise of the patrons in the rooms ahead, that it would be a peaceful evening...

But it seemed like Loki wasn't done with her yet this night.

As they walked though the beaded doorway, she felt him before she saw him in a high backed chair in the far corner. Two books placed on the round coffee table by the arm of his chair as he pored over a third, his lion-colored hair falling over one page. Her basket carrying the bag of herbs was propped up against the side of the chair.

Loren must have spotted him at the same time for they both stopped, but their reactions were totally different.

Loren's aura flared around them both as a low sound, more like a growl issued from Loren's throat as she stepped slightly forward...as if she were trying to physically block him from seeing Raina.

While Raina's heart did a little skip of excitement, before being firmly reminded that she was not happy that he had followed her back to the Loft.

Nonetheless, his turbulent blue eyes rose from the ancient pages of a book she now recognized as having belonged to her great grandmother...and settled directly on her. A light mocking in their slate-blue depths for her friend's actions, recognizing it for what it was, and how completely ineffective Loren proved to be.

Placing her right hand on Loren's shoulder, she gave the slightest pressure, and her friend eased back to her side. Knowing, without knowing why, that he would hear them if they were whispering in the courtyard from where he sat.

Raina kept her gaze on him as she walked toward him, easing around couches and smiling patrons. Their voices becoming a low murmur in her ears as she watched his aura flare around him for a heartbeat before collapsing back in around his body...

Raina knew how to stare a man down, she'd been doing it for years, yet never had she had to do so in the Loft. For they had always instinctively acknowledged her status here, always avoiding a direct confrontation. Yet here this stranger sat, with one of her most beloved books resting securely on his lap as he held her gaze. And she wasn't sure if she should be offended by the gesture or take the appreciation she saw slowly rising in his darkening eyes as a compliment and leave it as such.

Stopping a few paces in front of him, their gazes still locked, she cocked her head to one side to ponder

this man who she had decided not to like and reaffirmed that she should indeed not like him. He was a dangerous one, with that small cleft in his chin, thick eyelashes, and arching, dark blond brows...

"You brought my herbs..." He seemed surprised that those were the first words from her mouth, but he nodded all the same and leaned further into the chair, resting the back of his head against the velvet as he continued to hold her gaze.

"And your basket," he added.

"Hmm, yes, and my basket. Thank you for that as well."

\* \* \* \*

She was beautiful to watch in this place. Where her body was at ease, her Power flowing from the book he held in his lap. She must have thumbed through these pages a thousand times.

Her hair was now tightly wound about her head like some living crown. Seemingly recognizing her for the queen of this castle, her lilac eyes had gone from a blue-lavender to a dark and vibrant purple.

As he watched her walk toward him, their gazes locked in some ancient challenge for dominance. He recognized the fact that it would be rude of him, in her place of Power, not to defer to her, yet he did not wish to lose sight of those royal-colored eyes. Not even for the second it would take him to lower his gaze, and return to hers.

"You're very welcome." Aidan saw the blatant question that filled her eyes before she touched her

right ear and watched her brow crinkle with what she was about to ask.

"When did the handle break?"

Puzzled himself, since he didn't remember it being so, he felt an overwhelming urge to look down and lost to it for a split second before he could catch himself. Breaking contact with her gaze, and claiming her winner of the match. "It's not broken, as far as I can see."

Nodding her head in agreement, she stepped forward, leaned quickly over, and carefully took the book from his lap, holding it securely up to her chest.

He let her take the book, though he could have easily stopped her. She was quick...for a witch...but slow by any of the Tribes standards.

"So you're right, it must have been a trick of the shadows." Ah, but she was a smooth one, and fewer had he met that were better.

If he hadn't been in this place, he would not have looked down. The urge to do so had been fully her doing. And that she was powerful enough to have him do even that slight gesture meant, that if she truly set her mind to it, she could do more.

"Now that was a bit of dark magic, Rainfall, forcing someone to do something against their will..."

\* \* \* \*

How did he know that nickname? Fala must have used it in front of him.

"Now, sir, I did not force you to do anything your manners were not inclined to do for you. The urge to

glance down was there...I just helped push it along a wee bit." Taking a step back, she stopped moving further away when she felt something tug on her blouse.

Looking down for something she might have snagged it on, she found one long, elegant hand holding the edge of her flowing amethyst sleeve. And that hand was attached to a smiling cad of a man as one side of her top was now pulled down her shoulder, giving the aforementioned cad quite a view of her bare shoulder and the white, crescent-shaped scar upon it.

How had he taken hold of her sleeve without her notice?

Hades with the sleeve! Being a Practitioner, would he recognize the mark?

Finding his gaze, she knew the question that was awakening within his eyes. She saw it form like a thundercloud over the ocean and the assumed conclusion flash like lightning in his jaded, sapphire eyes.

The need to defend herself rose swift and hot in her throat, only to be stomped down by pride. He would think what he would...why his opinion seemed to matter...

"You know nothing of my life. Don't assume to judge what you are in ignorance of." A blaze flared in his eyes with her words, turning the sapphire to near black as gold and ruby sparks flared within their depths. Reminding her that he was a magic user of unknown strength and, even more important, morals.

By his previous words, he knew the rules of

Karma—of what made a magic user white, red, or black—but he'd said the words with such carelessness that he left her with the distinct impression that he walked a more shadowed path than she.

One that was easily taken, but not so easily left behind...

"For one so young, you know the Laws of the Way quite well..." His softly spoken words were both an insult and a compliment, depending on the tone and from whom it came. But he had said it with such a lack of inflection that she wasn't sure which he'd meant it as. One only learned the Laws of the Way, or as others called it, the Wiccan Reed, by having been tested by corruption, anger, and all those emotions that lived in the darkest corner of a creature's soul. To truly know the Way and speak the words with certainty, an initiate had to walk the thin line between the realm of shadow and light, and choose the intent for the spells they wove...for in magic, Intent was everything.

"For one who appears just as young, you seem to know them even better." She had meant them as an insult, and any fool should have been instantly angered or enraged, but he confounded her again by releasing her sleeve and easing back into the high-backed velvet chair, chuckling low in his throat. It was obvious to the lowest of lackwits that her barb had missed its intended mark.

"Never have I heard words with more truth in them." Raina stood there, momentarily speechless by his reaction. She, who was known for holding her temper, would have been tempted to lash out verbally

at the issuer of her last accusation. Yet this stranger, who she'd seen with her own eyes radiate such Power with a single twitch of his lips, had taken her words as neither an insult nor a compliment, but as truth.

"We need to get back to the front room...Now." The frantic energy surrounding Loren wiped away the cobwebs that seemed to have settled upon Raina's mind, bringing back the reality of a full Loft and a million things that would need to be done before she found her sleep-therapy mattress and the sanctuary of the upper rooms.

Rubbing the binding of her grandmother's ancient book, she decided that avoiding the stranger would be the best and safest path for now. At least until she had set her heart and mind firmly on not liking him. He was a heartache waiting to happen. Any practitioner she knew would sense the pain that he held close to his chest, one that was long-living, from this lifetime to the next.

"You know nothing of me, Elder," Raina said softly, "and I have a feeling you will bring me nothing but pain. So please, be so kind as to leave my establishment."

\* \* \* \*

A million questions came to her lips for this enigma, none of which she asked, but of all which he saw in her gaze, felt in her Power as she both drew away from and closer to him with each breath.

And just as he was sure she had found the question that would start her journey onto the unknown

ecstasy that she could only discover in his world...The one that smelled of trees and seawater comes creeping up behind her and touches her arm, drawing her away from him as surely as the moon from the stars.

He heard the confusion in her voice, knew that he could push her no further without inciting the wrath of the Utameer that were barely tolerating his presence. And he would chase away this creature whose very complexity was beginning to fascinate him.

He knew that she was attracted to him, could feel the sway of her aura as it caressed his, mingling Power. But she denied them both the pleasure of a Joining.

\* \* \* \*

Rising from the chair, he left the two books that had called out to him on the side table and performed a short bow. A gesture done with such ease she thought he must have done it a thousand times before, creating such grace in so simple a movement as a bend at the waist and sweep of a hand.

He ignored her bristly friend as he took the hand that had been rubbing the book and kissed her knuckles with a feathery brush of his lips

Raina felt the shiver roll down her spine at the touch of his mouth, warm breath and velvet lips, but swore to ignore it. Physical reactions could be ignored for the right incentive. *Now if he would just leave!*

"Only if you will give me your name." For a



moment she had thought she'd spoken the words aloud, then remembered that she had asked him to leave a moment before.

"No!" Loren's voice was indignant, almost panicked as she once again tried to place herself between them.

Raina was no fool; she knew the Power held in a name. It was why they were given sacred names when initiated into the Craft. From that day forward, it was spoken only among those of the coven. It seemed that the creature that wrote Rumpelstiltskin knew a bit more about the Craft than would have been tolerated in their day.

But why would Loren care if he knew her birth name? Better yet, why did her friend fear him so?

Pondering the creature that stood before her, leonine hair flowing down past solid shoulders and a toned physique that the cream sweater and butt-hugging jeans he wore did nothing to conceal...

He was simply too...beautiful.

"Would you truly leave if you had my name?" Raina asked, feigning an ignorance she had never had.

He saw where this was leading, and he was bound and determined not to let her have her way. "For a time."

Ah, he caught where she would have taken it...spells, clever as well as lovely. "And what would you do with it?" She heard the challenge in her voice, though she hadn't meant for it to be there. Saw the answering one in his eyes as his tongue slipped past sensual lips to wet them before he spoke.

"I would feast upon the beauty of it until its bearer saw fit to give me more than her name."

Gods...if his touch was as arousing as his tongue..."Raina..." It was no more than a whisper expelled on an outward breath, but he heard it, his eyes flashing with this little victory.

"Done, then." And as quickly as the words were said, he was past the beaded doorway and out of sight. Whatever further protests her friend was about to say died on her lips with his absence.

"Loren...I take it you know him?"

Loren didn't like the curious sparkle in her friend's eyes, and the mulish set of Loren's mouth told her so.

"I'll take that as a yes." Touching her friend's shoulder, Raina gave her a half-grin before pulling her into a hug.

"You know I am always guarded with my heart. Trust me to protect it now."

Loren took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. Raina could feel the tension that hovered around her friend fade into the floor.

"I trust you, Rainbow; you know I do..."

Raina cringed at the use of her nickname from childhood. Loren only used it when she was feeling overly protective and knew something she didn't. Loren had heard one of her coven use it once a few months back, and she'd never forgotten it.

"We will finish this discussion later, Lore-master; don't think you've gotten out of it that easily." Winding her left arm through the platinum blond's right, they headed toward the front room. Raina pushed aside the feeling of déjà vu as she once again

hoped for a peaceful, and uneventful evening.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan walked out the front door, the cool breeze off the bay a few blocks down slowly easing the fire in his veins.

The Power that had flowed over his hands as he held the ancient book still clung to him. Twining about his ancient body; stretching to encompass him fully within its silvery, incandescent light as he walked down the street toward Haven and the bustling party goers of the night. But even more strange was that his Power accepted it with such ease, mingling the light from the book with the twilight shadows that forever surrounded him.

Ever upward, the foreign Power twisted about his forearms, eased over his shoulders; caressing his neck as the cool light slipped into his hair. Further it climbed, cocooning him completely as it rolled over his forehead, misting his sight like a thin gauze as it covered his eyes.

A spell? A binding that was long ago placed on the book to protect its knowledge?

His first instinct as he slipped into the shadows, becoming one with the black-gray of the middle realm between light and dark, was to absorb the Power within himself; feed on what the book had so willingly given...

And it was in that moment when of his own free will he pulled the Power within his soul, that Aidan knew he was in way over his head.

Power, rich and thick slid like molasses down his throat, through his eyes, absorbed into his skin; sinking into his soul...and just for a moment...lighting his heart with something he had not felt in centuries.

Hope.

Stumbling as his senses were overwhelmed, he stopped and placed a steady hand upon a black iron fence, the coolness turning to flame beneath his palm as if the metal had been newly forged. But when he pulled away his hand the metal was cool to the touch, his palm unmarked by anything but the soft imprint of the black metal of the fence.

Couples walked past him, arm in arm, never noticing the man that stood there, staring at his hand as if it had turned into some alien being.

He was a creature of wind and fire, weaving within the shadows came as unconsciously to him as breathing, and yet...

*Protect her, child of shadows. Let no harm come to the Sacred... The soft words, at once both masculine and feminine, two voices speaking as one, echoed through his mind, repeating as it softly faded into the nothingness from whence it came.*

Power danced in and out of his vision, the colors changing and molding from red to blue, to yellow, to white, fading as the voice had, but leaving a low humming in his ears, like the sound of a thousand swarming bees buzzing as they left the hive to form a new colony. And then the only sound was that of his breathing, deep and slow, his heart beating as he imagined the hummingbirds did while in flight.

"Damnation, Aidan, what ha'e we gotten ourselves into now?"

Taking a grounding breath, he looked up to the night sky. Stars that were pale and barely visible to those walking obliviously past on the street were brilliant balls of color to him, never ceasing to mesmerize him. His eyes traveled toward the east, where the symbol of the Mother would soon be rising, searching for a measure of calm in the eternity of the twilight sky.

"Aidan McGrath, shaking in his boots from an old book and a girl that was too wondrous fair for her own good..."

Taking one more deep breath for good measure, he straightened his spine, ran a slightly shaking hand through his hair, and headed out again for Haven.

He did not know what spell she had cast upon him to hallucinate as such...

*Hallucination...is that what you're calling it?*

*What else could it have been?*

*Aye, what else could it have been...*

The walk to the club was as it always had been. People moving out of his way without truly noting they were doing so, recognizing the need to move but not exactly why.

Humans were creatures of instinct. From a fear of the dark and those things they could not see...but felt without the knowing of it. To the worshipping of the sun as they lay out by the masses, flocking to the cleansing of the ocean waters, or seeking the solitude of a mountain trail.

Their technology had made them forget where they

had come from, disconnected them from all Creation. But it seemed, somewhere, in the back of their furthest memory, the Song still sang to them.

Aidan could see the line of people to get into Haven long before he saw the black velvet rope that hung across the front steps into the club. It was Thursday night and the line was filled with an assortment of genres, from the cowboy and the businesswomen to the Goth and the Hippie. All were welcome at Haven, as long as you were willing to play by the rules. Variety is the spice of life, so they say...

Nemo stood at the rope, a 6'5 Nubian princess who didn't take shit from anyone. Like all of her kind, every slant or curve bespoke of an inner grace, an artist's elegant brush stroke for her slanting black brows and flowing ebony mane. Bottomless mica eyes that tilted upward at the ends and a dark coffee-colored body that was...what was it they were calling it these days? Da bomb?

She looked like she should be walking down a runway in Paris, not watching the door at a club in downtown San Diego, of all places.

When she spotted the crowd parting for him from a block away, she unhooked the rope, gave the two men who pushed eagerly forward a 'move and die' look, and silently waited in her black leather pants and fishnet tank-top with the matching black leather bra beneath. Patiently waiting as one of her favorites of the club headed toward her with the fire-bright glow of hunger in his eyes...and a silver webbing coating his aura...

Aidan noted her stance go from welcoming to reserved as he came up to her. That she did not move aside to let him pass, was in fact standing rigidly in front of him, her eyes drilling holes into his head was only a confirmation of what he felt radiating in slapping waves from her skin.

"Ease down, Nemo. I'm not in the mood to remind you of who you owe your loyalty to this night."

\* \* \* \*

Blinking, she watched as his Power flared and the foreign webbing eased beneath his skin, seconds before she realized she had not backed down as requested, and was now sitting on her ass on the deep red carpet that had just been beneath her feet.

Aidan watched her eyes go from suspicious and defiant to confused and then finally settle on repentant as she moved to stand without his aide, her eyes cast downward, ceding to his Power.

"My apologies, Aidan... for a moment, I thought..."

"Speak of it no further, Nemo," Raising her chin lightly with his thumb, he waited until her eyes uneasily rose to his before placing a soft kiss on her lips. "Your loyalty has not been questioned." Lightly, he touched her mind. They were of a height, his gaze silently chiding her

*"If I were to come to you as a cold breeze in a snow storm, you would know me..."*

Nemo nodded in assent to his words as Aidan brushed her cheek lightly, mingling auras with each

touch, claiming her once again in his favor.

Stepping back, she watched him in awe as he passed her, the black oaken door opening without his touch as he reached it, and faded into the shadows of Haven.

He was The Che-awk of this Lelayo, their word for Gathering, and one of the oldest among them. He had called them from a solitary life to join and mingle among the numb and lonely. Where they had once lived on the fringes of society, they now were becoming a part of it. If only the mortals knew what they welcomed so heartily into their midst. Talk about the fox in the hen house...

Nemo smiled at that last thought, knowing that this way of life could never last. If the Council didn't try to disband them, then the Warlocks or the fanatics would try to kill them off...One Lang was powerful enough, but as a Lelayo, they were unstoppable. Aidan was blatantly challenging the will of the Council; living as he truly was, gathering Loyal, calling the Lang together...

She only hoped that when the sun rose, her Che-awk would be among the standing.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan walked through the oaken doorway. The music that was barely audible outside the thick walls pulsed over him in waves; and with it came the Power.

Raw energy flung from wildly dancing figures beneath the multi-colored lights, moving with abandon as their scantily clad bodies gyrated to the



erotic beat pounding from unseen speakers as the scent of jasmine and musk mingled with sweat and desire.

Ah...Home.

Haven, or Cesspit of Sin, as some of the more ignorant liked to call it, was once an old movie theatre. The huge screen had actually been left hanging from the ceiling, twenty or so feet from the ground, where it played classic monster movies, modern vamp flicks, old kung-fu movies, or anything else that the master of the house was in the mood for. Personally, he had really grown a fondness for Japanese anime. The way they drew the men and women actually reminded him of the Langlowlaw. Where the men are just as beautiful as the women, with never-ending legs and slanted eyes...

The chairs had all been taken out, and the cathedral ceiling had been repainted with scenes of castles, knights and maidens, unicorns and dragons, fairies and ancient gods. Prostitutes and royalty running from one century to another in no particular order, their dress, or lack thereof, painted with an inspired brush. All of their painted eyes on the crush of creatures dancing and flirting below them. Smiling with a knowing look in their gaze that no innocent ever had.

From where he stood, he could see the first-level ironwork railing with people leaning against it as they people-watched from a safe distance. This is where those that had been allowed in for the first time usually stayed, the 'virgins' as they were called. They watched the people on the lower levels of the Pit,

working up the nerve or daring one another to go a level lower to the less innocent crowd. The levels were circular, you could walk all around the main level and wind up at the front door where you started, having passed three bars, a number of pool tables and nice normal-looking tables and chairs, a few dartboards and a wooden dance floor where the tamer of the crowd would dance.

If one went to the railing, they could look down into the second floor and see the black silk ceiling that hung over the third level before coming to the circular dance floor. Each level down, the crowd seemed to lose not just clothing, but inhibitions and a bit of their innocence as well.

Cameras were not allowed in Haven. They were looked upon just as harshly as weapons. If you got caught with either at the door, which you would, you were never allowed in again. And Nemo, as well as the other bouncers, had a very, very long memory.

The second level was down a flight of thirteen steps where the Initiates played. There were no pool tables or dartboards on this level, but consisted of mainly smoky, glass-top tables and high-backed chairs with long elegant couches and even longer bars. A second-level dance floor flourished with grinding bodies, separate from the lower, third-level dance floor, where people could let loose at a more conservative pace than their compatriots below. Those that sat at the second level were learning the rules of the flirtation and the tease. How much you could touch before you get slapped, the excitement of pressing the rules just that much further than you

ever had before, and how to say no and mean it. Mostly this was a college crowd, the X-users and experimentalists, the swingers and hippies, those who weren't vanilla enough to be on the first level but not learned in the ways of the Loyal, as were those one more level down. The second-level crowd were in it all for the fun of it, the laughs and the good time that were just a bit more on the partying side than the Virgins.

The third and final level was again thirteen red-carpeted steps down into what was known as the Pit by some, Salvation for others. The dance floor was made of onyx, and had matching décor in black and shades of dark purples, deep reds and gold. Those that congregated here most often wore fewer cloths than more. Leather, lace, silk, velvet and vinyl were the five major materials worn here. Dispersed within, a Stetson here and an innocent there, with pale skin or tanned, hair that was long or short and often multi-colored. But all of them had one thing in common, their love for the Langlowlawk. Or simply, the Lang.

Unlike the second level, the third level had a layer of black silk that was attached to the floor of the second level beneath the railing, giving them a false, semi-transparent ceiling about 12 feet above the floor and cut out like a donut, so that from the first level you could see the dancers where there was no silk, and the lights pounded down on them as it did any other. But not the surrounding area littered with couches and low coffee tables. The only chairs here were large and overstuffed, sturdy enough to accommodate two if you wished. The floor was

covered in thick Persian carpets in shades of black, red and threads of gold. One person had spilled a drink on the rug once by accident. It hadn't happened again.

This is the level that Aidan went to, his Levi's and cream sweater standing out like a white sheep among a flock of black, but everyone knew that his tastes in clothes ran just as widely as his taste in wine, women and song. Aidan could well show up in some leather and lace tomorrow as the night after.

Those that came and stayed on this level were looking for something that they couldn't find on the floors above...or anywhere else.

Some came here to this shadowy world looking for Death, and others for a Dark Angel. Some came here to cast off some of society's restrictions, while others came to help them do so. But one and all here were devoted to the Lang, whether they were members or not, donors or not, they knew what the Lang were and had vowed to protect them with their very lives if need be.

And in return, they could lounge beside, play chess with, make love to, be spanked or petted by, talk about everything or nothing at all with them. Knowing that they were safe among the Gathering from the hypocritical and righteous of Humanity.

Stopping once he reached the opposite end of the circle, he nodded to each of the darkly clad figures that lounged on large silk pillows that were tossed around his chair. Made of mahogany, it glowed red beneath the muted lights above the silken ceiling. The cushions were made of red velvet, and the entire chair

was covered with scenes of battle in ancient times, long before Man had begun to record such things. It was known as the Throne of Blood, going back to a time before the Tribes had forgotten their beginnings...and long before his Awakening in this life.

Easing into the chair, he slowly ran his gaze over the Gathering, the back of his head resting against the velvet of the chair, as one of the women that had been closest to the throne crawled over to his feet and rested her head lightly upon his knee. When he did not draw away from her touch, she leaned into him more fully and wrapped one arm around his calf.

Layla had hair the shade of a raven, so black that it turned blue when the light hit it just right. She had large, slanted eyes the color of dates, not because she was Lang, but from her Arabic ancestry. She had skin that rivaled the golden hues of the Sahara and a mouth that would have earned her a pretty penny in any porn if she had wished to do so. But she was devoted to the Lang. He had found her in Constantinople, now called Istanbul, being gang-raped by three men, screaming like a hellcat and fighting them just as fiercely. It had been the rolling waves of fear that had drawn him from his lover's arms and down that dark alley long after the moon had set for the night.

He'd snapped one of their necks with an effortless twist of one wrist. The second had gone down with his own curved knife embedded through his skull, and the third, who had been otherwise occupied, had lost his eyes to Layla's thumbs as her arms were

freed, and he'd ripped the man's genitalia from his body when he'd stood up, screaming. He wasn't sure if that one survived. It would have been less cruel to kill him, but the punishment seemed fitting.

Layla had been His ever since. She went where he went, a silent shadow, never speaking again after giving him her name. There was a haunted look in her eyes most nights, but it was overshadowed by the wild glance of a tiger who knew she could kill you and not feel a bit of remorse for it come dawn. When he went to his penthouse, she was more often than not curled up beside him as the sun rose, leaving soon after she felt his body slip into its sleeplike trance to sharpen her ever present blades, or work out to Tae-bo or whatever had caught her attention.

He often wondered if the reason why Leo came around so often was because Layla was there. The only pure Child of Air he'd ever met had been courting Layla in his devoted Leo fashion for over a year now, ever since they had moved to this city by the sea...well, ocean.

Everyone liked Leo. He was just one of those kinds of creatures; he made people laugh. Born from one of the last pure Che-awk lines, he was...how would you say...flighty? A creature of Air, who found joy in every sound that drifted on the wind. His ancestors were known as not only Fairies but also Angels, Banshees, and Pookahs. As there were creatures of Air that loved the Light, there were others that reveled in the Darkness of shadows.

"Aidan, luv...what have you been up to?" A lovely creature in skin-tight black lace and leather asked as

she lightly moved his leg to one side so that she could slide onto his lap without disturbing Layla. Curling an arm around his neck and nibbling lightly at his Adam's apple, she raised her scarlet head to catch his gaze with her blue ice eyes and impish grin.

"Clio, you're a Muse. Try and behave just a little in front of the Loyal. They look up to you for guidance..."

"They get enough of that from you, sweetling." Tapping him on the nose, she nipped him lightly on the chin with pearly white teeth as a hand ran through his thick blond hair. "Amazon, Muse, Goddess. They can be such boring titles if you aren't allowed to raise a little Hades once in a while...you know, stir the cauldron and all that." Running her ring finger over his third eye chakra in the middle of his forehead, she leaned back to get a better look at him, but couldn't quite put the mark on what was different about him...he just was.

"Lilly is either still that good a lay, or you've been playing with a witch that is quite aware of her gifts." Clio leaned into his chest, her long, cranberry hair falling onto his lap. Grounding with a thought, she lightly sniffed his skin, her eyes closing slowly, as her magic flared about them both, probing his shields, noting their resistance and just a shadowy trace of...the Other.

Placing his hand around her exposed throat, he politely moved her away from his chest. Then tapped her lightly on her forehead, breaking her concentration and whatever she had seen that had so fascinated her.

"Who I see or what I do when I am with them is not your concern, Clio..." His words had gone to a whisper as her eyes opened, two pools of ancient Power, staring back at him.

Clio was actually older than he was, but she would never say by how much. She kept her Power closely leashed, so he rarely saw what he did now within her normally frivolous gaze.

"I am Keeper of the Line, Muse of History, and once praised as the queen of all the gods." Leaning into him once again, he felt her Power roll over him in waves, each one stronger than the last, pushing him deeper into the chair until he knew if he'd been human, she'd have crushed him.

"My apologies if I have offended you, Elder. I have not forgotten that you are Langlolan of this clan." The words were said formerly, if a bit hotly, but the pressure instantly eased, leaving her face just a breath away from his own.

"Clio?"

"Aye, Aidan?" Her sweet breath brushed over his face, reminding him of night-blooming jasmine with just a tinge of vanilla.

"Please remove yourself from my lap, or you'll be my dinner." Aidan watched the shiver run over her skin, her head rolling on her neck with the pure pleasure the thought created. And when her eyes again met his, the lusty and playful Clio of old was back in place.

"As you wish..." It was a line from *The Princess Bride*, with about the same meaning, except that she wasn't saying she loved him, she was swearing her



fealty to him by trusting him with her life and her gifts...something that was held far more dear than love.

He eased her across his chest into the crook of his right arm. Her long alabaster legs and thigh-high black leather boots lay across his faded Levi's. Her almost non-existent lace mini-skirt left nothing to the imagination, scarcely covering her red satin panties.

Raising his gaze to the rest of the room, he was not surprised to see them gathered around him. The music had changed to something slow, easing along the senses as the soprano's voice seduced. The dance floor was nearly bare but for a couple too enraptured with each other to note that they were the solo erotic act to those above.

"We are the children of Langlolan and Che-awk...Fire and Air. As we once took nourishment from the flame and the storm, now do we feed upon blood and emotion, from the magic that is imbued within them. Never forget that it was the Utameer that stole the favor of the gods with their petty jealousies. Once you have tasted one of Earth or Water, they will belong to you. And as we are not allowed to kill them, we shall bind them to us. Well come the mortals of Power, for their blood does run with ours. Well come those Loyal to the Gathering. As the gods will it, so shall we do their bidding."

Shaking off the feeling that the words rang hollow in his heart this night, he looked down at the beauty on his lap and slowly smiled.

Leaning over Clio, he felt her shiver as he ran his gaze over her deceptively delicate body. His Power

mingled with hers as they flared together, one becoming indistinct from the other. He felt the energy grow between them like a warm mist before his eyes. Touching his skin, sinking all that Power into her, surging within her.

"Aidan..."

Aidan ran his left hand through the cranberry strands of her waist-length hair while his right hand drifted up over her bare rib cage, over the lace of her top, to caress the hard nipple beneath. "As it was you that woke me, know that I am returning to you what you gave me so long ago...and taking what I will."

He felt the surge of Power surrounding him as the others of the Lang merged with one of their Loyal. Taking them to the rug-strewn floor, or lowering them onto one of the many couches. Sighs of ecstasy and a tinge of fear surrounded him before he too lowered his head to the throbbing pulse at the base of her neck and shoulder, running his tongue lightly over her skin.

Pressing the tip of his velvet tongue against her hot, moon-kissed neck, the pulse jumped like a trapped creature beneath his touch.

Clio's moan of pleasure as she ran her fingers through his hair called to something deep inside of him. Aidan inhaled, and with each breath, absorbed the Power that was literally rolling off Clio's skin.

"Why do you tease me, Aidan? Pierce my flesh and take your fill of me..."

Clio pulled his mouth firmly against the base of her neck before he felt his fangs emerge from the channels in the top of his gums and sinking them into his

mentor, and Elder of this Gathering.

Power surged into his mouth as her immortal blood ran down his throat to swirl in his stomach. He felt her chest as it arched against him, her sighs of pleasure pulsing into his groin, as her hand found and stroked him through his pants. Making him heavy and hard with the need to take her to the pillows and give her back a bit of the Power that he had taken.

But a vision of the witch, kneeling at his feet, eyes the color of twilight, lips bent at the corners, stopped him from leaving his seat, taking Clio upstairs to one of the many rooms above and easing into her very willing body.

Rolling his tongue over the two precise wounds he'd made, he felt them healing, closing up, and lifted his head from her.

Clio raised heavy lids to look up at him, a knowing in her eyes. For when they were connected, she had seen the witch as clearly as he had and knew the hold that the lovely mortal...who had the look of both Tribes...would have on their Che-awk. Aye, she would have to meet this witch and give her the knowledge she would need to decide which path she would choose before one was forced upon her by Fate.

Aidan saw the knowing in her gaze, as he saw the image of his witch reflected like a scrying pool in her ice-blue eyes. Knowing that his witch's life would from this night...never be the same.

"Clio, keep those things that you have seen close to your chest, and I will have no grief with you." Raising

her head from his shoulder, she lightly brushed her painted red lips against his own. Her hand wove into his silken hair, keeping him near her as she brought her lips across his jaw to his ear, appearing to the world as if she nibbled upon it.

*Aye, my lovely, as you wish...* Clio whispered teasingly within his mind.

Aidan knew that she would not tell the others what she had seen, but as she had granted him a favor, so would he owe her one. That was the Law of Honor. And if there was one thing that both Tribes respected, it was that. For a creature lacking honor was nothing more than a waste of flesh, and below the notice of the gods and the calling of magic.

Easing from his lap, she walked to the closest couch and caressed Evan's velvet-clad shoulder. His wavy raven-colored hair caressed the Celtic white skin of his lower back. The sapphire half-vest and tight leather pants exhibited to all a body that most gymnasts would envy and all sought to achieve.

Evan raised himself from Janel, a lovely creature with hair the color of old bronze and gold. Dull, yet glistening in the faded light as she lay languorously upon the red velvet cushions of the couch. Her moon-kissed arms rose upward slowly to pull him pleadingly back to her side; nuzzling the tattoo of a dragon that rested across most of his upper chest and over his heart. But the request in Clio's ice-blue eyes was not one to be ignored, so the Loyal beauty was released from the Dark Angel's embrace this night. Her arms slowly fell back to her side as she looked forlornly upon the two above her, pain mingling with

regret in her misty azure eyes.

She was of the Utameer, one that had come to them when Haven had first opened. Not knowing what she was, or the why. But Evan had known and taken his taste of her, this child of Earth and Water, binding her to him that first night. He had known as he watched her dance on the second floor, hips swaying, hands rotating with wrist against wrist to the Middle Eastern beat.

Taking one last look at Janel, Evan kissed his fingertips and touched her temple, then turned to follow Clio...and stopped.

"No, Clio, find another plaything tonight. Janel isn't feeling well..."

*You tell me 'No'? You, who was but a year old when I was timeless? You, who would have been reborn a thousand times and still not learned what I taught you in a single night...?*

Aidan heard her words brush his mind...as did the rest of the Lang, forcing him to intercede.

*Enough, both of you... We are not the Utameer. We do not fight among ourselves for prestige or Power. We feed off of those with no control of their gifts...* Leaning forward, he reached down to touch the swirl of expended energy near his ankles. "Take care with your emotions, I can feel the force of your words licking at my feet."

Aidan watched as they both instantly grounded their Power. Emotions always ran high after a feeding, their control being at its lowest, while their gifts raged about them in a chaotic dance to those with the Sight. It was at such times that the control

that they prided themselves on, that separated them from the Utameer was at its thinnest. But some in the room had seen first hand what happened to those that lost it.

The Burning Times were not something that would soon be forgotten...or forgiven.

Touching them both with his mind, he cooled the emotions that could just as easily burn bright once again, and motioned his head toward the rooms above.

*Go upstairs and spend this passion in a more Langish manner. I will watch over Janel...*

Silently, Clio and Evan weaved their way among those of the Gathering to the rooms above.

The others had not heard his words, but had felt Clio's anger.

There would be a falling-out over Janel...as there was when she first came. When Evan had made it quite clear to all the Gathering that Janel was his, and his alone. Not very Che-awk of him, for they were not a jealous lot and rarely, if ever, possessive. But whatever bug had bitten him in the ass that night, none had challenged him; as Aidan hadn't even raised an eyebrow about it.

Janel belonged to the Utameer, but would never be fully trusted by them now if he returned her to them. For her loyalties would always be divided...unless...

The urge to set things right and send Janel to her pack rolled upon his tongue, yet his lips would not release them. He had returned one of their Tribe to them already tonight.

Where was this urge to reunite the Tribe of Earth

and Water coming from? In all his years, he had thought it but once or twice, and never acted on it. It was the place of the Witches to lead them home, not their adversaries.

But as the silver mist of the Other that had covered his eyes did so once again, creeping from behind his lids, it showed him what could be if he did so. How the emptiness that at times filled his soul, would with this simple action, fill just the slightest bit. Like a web being slowly mended before his eyes, he saw how each action that he made with good intent affected not only himself, but all creatures. And what it would mean to this child that was loyal to the Lang.

She had served them well for over a year; a more loyal one, not of his Tribe, were few and far between. Did she not deserve a reward for her loyalty? Did she not deserve to know the wholeness of soul that only came when one ran with one's pack, just as he felt within the Lelayo, this Gathering?

As the mist of the Other slowly faded from his gaze, he gently brushed a hand across Layla's head before gently touching Janel's mind.

Aidan watched as Janel's gaze moved toward him, dark red lace and purple silk moving like a second skin over her lithe form as she raised her eyes to his. Just as he saw the others of the Lang do the same.

They felt whatever it was that had told him to mend her soul, to make right the wrong that had been done her. And they knew it to be not of the Lang, but the Other of the gods that had once walked among them in the beginning of all creation...

As they looked upon their Che-awk, those with the

gift saw his aura shrouded with the silver light, and those without it felt the change in the air. Electricity rising as Janel rose and walked over to Aidan, falling to her knees before him as something wild and miserably alone awoke behind her eyes.

"Janel, you who have been Loyal to the Langlolawk and served us well. You, who have protected me while in trance, while some would try to do me harm, or given me that which sustains me with welcoming arms...so it is with both regret and joy that I send you home."

Aidan knew the moment that Evan heard his words. For a great cry of anger ripped from his throat as the door to the rooms above slammed open, and he came running down. His figure was but a speeding shadow to most until he stopped before Aidan. Only his black leather pants covered his well-sculpted body as a new red slash across his back stopped bleeding. A single crimson drop rolled down Evan's pale spine.

"You shall not do this thing, Aidan..." Evan knew his whispered words were heard by one and all as he took the last steps on the rug-strewn floor, covering the remaining distance to his Elder.

"I would rather take her here and now to the hereafter than let them have her!" All was silence, the music that swept about them unheard as all watched the battle of wills between two of their most powerful Lang.

"Then do so, Evan. Take her life here, before us all. Take her to the floor at my feet and drain the life from her eyes. So that we may never again see the hollow pain that haunts them." Whatever Evan was going to



yell at him was forgotten as Janel's arms wrapped slowly around his waist from behind. Her face turned to the side as she rested her cheek contentedly in the hollow of his lower spine in absolute devotion.

Everyone watched in a dark and chaotic silence as Evan took her ivory arms from his waist and turned to her. The rage that was first there for all to see on the stairs, easing into regret as they stared at one another, azure eyes pleading with a brown so dark it appeared in any light almost black.

\* \* \* \*

"Are you unhappy, my pet? Have I been such a neglectful master to you?" Evan whispered. Running his hand through her bronze hair, the warm silk of it reminded Evan of all the nights she had spent at his side, curled securely beside him in slumber as he watched the slow rise and fall of her chest, wondering at the Fate that had given this beauty to his care.

But he could also recall the times he'd woken to her softly weeping in her sleep, never to recall a reason when he asked her why.

Yet, to imagine her, moaning beneath one of those furry bastards as he thrust within her, or running with the pack beneath the full moon's light, forgetting about him completely...

\* \* \* \*

"Aidan, I will. I will release her into the next life, rather than let one of them have her!" But his voice

was now filled with a ragged desperation, and Aidan could see that he had pushed his friend too far to back down and not lose face before the others.

So it was truly up to Aidan to decide if this loyal creature, Uta or not, should live or die.

"As it is the law of the gods, you may not do so. Only a mortal of true will or one of her own may take her life, by athame or by magic. And none here of the Loyal would wish to harm Janel, as she has served the Lang well." Standing, he put his hand on Evan's shoulder, wordlessly asking him to understand...

Aidan heard the words he'd spoken, but it felt as if they came from another. Until this night, the thought of calling Janel's kind to her had never occurred to him, in thought or dream. Yet here he stood, willing to cause such pain to one of his own to see that she be returned to her Tribe. Much as he had done earlier in the day when he'd entered...

Raina...and the book that he had read there. Bringing to mind memories of his mother, and how she believed that all life was sacred...

Evan used that moment of inner revelation to his advantage. Before anyone could stop him, he turned and was upon his friend; fangs bared and fists flailing against Aidan in a wild fury.

"She's mine, Aidan, I'll not let them have her!" Aidan caught the blurred motion that was the movement of his friend's fists and held them to his chest, their faces mere inches apart. The frantic rage in Evan's dark eyes pulled at Aidan's senses, bringing him back from the path he was about to take and causing him to question what he saw.

"Sheath your fangs, brother, and pause a moment to think on what you do."

Aidan's calm tone was the last thing Evan had expected to hear as his wrists were held firmly by his Che-awk...wrists that could so easily be snapped.

"If she is anything more than a plaything to you, listen to what I say, Evan. Sooner or later, they would have found her, and either taken her in or destroyed her. And one or many of those loyal to us would have died trying to protect her. Is that what you want?" Aidan watched the emotions slide across his eyes. Anger, betrayal, denial, and then finally acceptance for the truth Evan knew he spoke.

"She is mine, Aidan."

And it was with those few whispered words that Aidan knew that Evan felt something more than possession for Janel. Even if he would not admit such a thing to himself. "Then it is you who shall send her home, free of your mark, and the only memory she will have of us will be in her dreams."

"Nay, Aidan..."

But Aidan saw the acceptance in his friend's black-oak eyes, felt Evan's wrists go slack in his grip.

Taking his stormy-blue eyes from his Lang brother, Aidan brought them to the light azure gaze of a child of Earth and Water. One that they had been told was the cause of their separation from the gods, but now he was not so sure.

Releasing Evan's wrists, Aidan called Janel to them with his gift, brushing across her mind with a gentle familiarity that he would any of his Tribe. In her loyalty, she had proven herself worthy of the Lang. So

he could not keep her in this misery that slowly pulled the joy from her soul.

"Janel, daughter of Earth and Water, from your actions you have proven yourself worthy of our regard. You have honored the Lang, and as such, we honor you with that which you most desire, yet cannot name."

Janel covered the distance between them still on her knees, her hands shaking slightly as she raised them to the one she had called Che-awk. The one she had called friend.

"I wish to stay with you, Aidan, with you and the Gathering..."

"No, Janel, your family will be coming shortly to claim you, and you must not be here when they do, for we would fight to keep you from harm, just as you would do for us..."

"No! Evan! Don't let him send me away!" The waves of agony that swelled from her were felt by all as her hands fell limp to the floor, shoulders shaking as she sobbed quietly, arms folding about her waist as if to hold in the agony of the coming separation.

"Evan. It's time." Releasing his wrists, Aidan watched as Evan knelt down before his favorite among the Loyal, raising her chin gently with his hand before spelling her with his touch. Breaking the bond that he had held her by with an almost audible scream as the severed energy swirled about those who watched in hushed silence. His midnight hair swirled among golden bronze as he bowed his forehead to hers, black oak eyes to azure blue. The contrast reminding all there of the two separate

worlds that they lived in. Sun courting moon, air swirling with earth. Never could there be a union between them...yet at a distance...

"Be as you were before that night,  
When eyes did meet in candlelight,  
Before the time I changed your fate,  
And with these words, my claim negate."

The blast of energy from the second binding as it broke swept like a rush of heat about the circle of the lower floor. Rising to the levels above, it sent any and all with the slightest gift crashing to the floor senseless with its Power, as those numb to the gift tried to catch them.

"Forget me now, and all you've seen,  
But to recall this life in dream,  
And know that we shall not forget,  
So mote it be, the spell is set."

The third binding sighed away into the shadows, to be replaced with a spell that would make her time here no more material than cobwebs and moonbeams.

Aidan watched Janel fall unconscious into Evan's arms. Knowing he could do nothing to ease his friend this pain as Evan pulled her to his chest and slowly rose, her limp body held securely against his chest. Knowing, as surely Aidan knew the moon would set beyond the ocean, that he had started their world on a new path...aye, that this was just the beginning.

Evan walked quickly through the throng of silent

Lang and Loyal, neither looking left nor right, but knowing all the same that his Che-awk and the Gathering followed him. Past the Throne of Blood, through the curtains of black silk that hid a door known only to the Gathering. Opening the door, he quickly strode through the pitch-black hallway, down another set of stairs and through another long corridor of inky blackness.

When finally he stopped, Evan knew he stood before a door. Even if he could only make out the faint gray of the starlight seeping through some cracks in the outline of the door from the total absence of light. Beyond that, he could smell fresh air filled with green and living things...the park and museums where they would set her down for her kind to find.

And yet, Evan could feel the Utameer on the other side already. They were not yet aware of the Lang behind the door, but sensed one of their own had begun her Awakening, and had moved quickly to her aid.

*Lady love and Lord protect you, Janel. May we meet again on more equal ground...*

Evan's words had been for Janel's mind alone, but Aidan had heard them brushing against his thoughts like cool velvet...making him wonder at his friend's sentiment.

Unlocking the door for Evan, Aidan carefully opened it, flinging out his senses into the night's silver tones, and felt the Utameer there, just beyond the darkest shadow, waiting for them.

"Evan, be quick about it. They're waiting for her, and I am in no mood for a brawl." So saying, Aidan

stepped out into the night. As he did so, the one that he had seen earlier at the Dubliner moved from the shadows, his black jeans and T-shirt matching the ebony of his hair, leaving only the tan of his face and arms to distinguish him from the rest of the night.

"As I have once this night already, I return one of your lost kin to you." Aidan said quietly.

Amber eyes glowed in the faint moon's light, black hair shining blue, falling straight about his tanned, square jaw and broad shoulders. Fearlessly, the black-haired Utameer moved toward them, his tribe staying behind as Aidan's did, knowing the rules to this ancient game.

"And as I thanked you once, I thank you twice, but wonder at your generosity." His voice was low, the Australian accent unmistakable in the rolling growl of his words.

"Well then, we share something in that, Na-meer, Freyr of your pack. But upon this I know and swear. This child of Earth and Water is worthy of your regard as she has proven worthy of ours. So do we return her to you with no binding upon her brow and her only memories of her time with us a surreal dream." Aidan didn't know if it would come to blows, but he knew, if they did share one thing in common, that Honor was sacred.

"I'm honored, Lang, that you give your word, but I have news for you as well." As the Na-meer came within feet of Aidan, the Lang noticed for the first time that they were of a height. Even though the stranger's build was bulkier than his, Aidan was sure it was muscle that filled that dark T-shirt, and there

would come a day that he would test its strength.

"There is a darkness that is killing our kind," The Na-meer began, "and we know it's taken some of yours as well. But as you Lang are of Air and Fire, there were no bodies left to return to you..."

Aidan felt a wave of shock roll through his tribe at the Na-meer's softly spoken words. For they had heard him as clearly as if he'd shouted them across a wide ravine, echoing this news in their minds.

"Then we advise you to guard this Uta, for she is dear to the Lang, and we would not wish her to become one among the missing." The warning in Aidan's tone was clear to all. If she came to harm, the shaky truce the Lang were offering would end.

The irony of Aidan's words occurred to both leaders at the same time. Where most Lang would try to subdue or break an Utameer, Aidan was threatening her own pack with her safety.

Evan crossed the distance between himself and the shadowy form of the Utameer leader, holding the still sleeping Janel to his chest. When he stood before the amber-eyed shifter, he stopped, keeping her close. "I would know the name of the one who will watch over our Janel."

Aidan saw the other leader's eyebrow rise at his long-time enemy's audacity and felt the Lang behind him readying for the fight to come.

To give a name to another was Power. Something that the Langlowlawk and Utameer had not done since the Tribe's banishment.

"My name is Jagur Lochloman, Na-meer of this Tuk-cha (*Family*)."

 Aidan slowly nodded his head,



never breaking eye contact with the Na-meer.

"I am Aidan McGrath, Che-awk of this Lelayo (*Gathering*)." They did not often use the First Words of their kind, leaving them with the Elders to reminisce about the time before the separation of the Tribes, the creation of the First Words, and the Last Battle. Before the gods' anger, there had been no language, for they had not needed one. They could express themselves completely with mind-touch and empathy.

Each leader assessed the other, noting the Power that they both kept tightly leashed about them; instinctively recognizing the other as a worthy opponent, and an honorable one.

"May the next time we meet be without bloodshed, Aidan, Che-awk of the Langlolawk." Jagur said formally.

"May the next time we meet be far and few between, Jagur, Na-meer of the Utameer." They had exchanged names, something that could be used to cast against them, but they both seemed to recognize the need for some form of truce if indeed their Tribes were being attacked.

Nodding, Aidan turned to Evan, noting that it was time to go. But the steps he took with Janel in his arms were slow ones as he handed her gently over to her Tribe's care, and it was not missed by either side.

"We are her family, shadow-walker; we will see that she comes to no harm." Evan gave him one last hard look before he settled Janel against Jagur's chest. Evan touched her brow once before backing away. He then turned, heading into the darkness beyond the doorway.

Taking a step back as well, Aidan gave this tentative ally a short nod. He then followed Evan into the relative safety beyond the ancient door.

Aidan knew when the Utameer left, keeping to the shadows with the skill of any Lang; for he felt their Power ease from against his shields like a fading humidity. "Well then, the night is still young."

Easing their way down the pitch-black hallway and back to Haven, Aidan started to get a craving for one of the few drugs that he allowed within the Lang. "Who's getting the Starbucks?"

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Lady love it, Raina! The night is still young! Come to the Dubliner with me and meet the boy’os.”

It was early of a sort...for those that didn’t have to wake up before dawn to start the baking for the day. Odd, how perception could revolve around an alarm clock. “Loren, it’s almost midnight. I need to get some sleep before my eyes fall out of my head and get lost under one of the tables.”

Loren had been hovering all night, as if expecting Raina to lose her way in the kitchen or walking down the hall. She’d never seen the imp of a girl act quite this way before.

Loren was more toward the hippie than the overprotective type, and she’d sure as Hades never hovered before.

Okay, so she hadn’t been feeling quite herself all day, more than less likely the after affects of the Black Water that she had sworn off with a vengeance. But then again, her moon was coming soon so it could be PMS pulling her into this gloomy funk she was in as well.

When He had left, she'd felt as if he'd taken a piece of her with him, the part that danced to a drummer's beat before a fire. Zills and coins, silk scarves and curvy women rolling their hips to a Middle Eastern beat beneath a full moon's light...

It had been too long since she'd danced with her coven sisters at the beach, in garb or a simple flowing skirt and a shirt tied at the waist. Some thought it had begun as a dance for women. An ancient exercise to strengthen their muscles, preparing them for giving birth and helping their bodies heal in the aftermath. Centuries before male doctors and their superior attitudes.

But she had always felt it went to a time beyond that, when women courted their lovers around a bonfire, moving with the flames, seducing their mates with the movement of their bodies. Maybe it was the Rom in her...

She had danced with them, waiting for the birth of Luna as she'd grown within her belly. The father of her unborn child had disappeared as quietly as he'd come into her life on that warm summer night.

And Luna, her beloved little one, whom none had thought would live out the first hours of her premature birth. Had entered this world with a mighty cry of defiance at their words and brought the coyotes howling outside her Aunt Lula's house on the Reservation...and the Puma...and the Horse...and the Raven. They had all come that star-filled night to welcome her into being. And it was in that moment that she knew she would never love another creature as much as she loved her Little Moon.

Raina had been eighteen, just finishing her freshman year at college...

But with Luna's birth, a bit of Raina's mother seemed to return. The loving creature that had sang and rocked her Little Moon to sleep beneath the stars. Luna had broken the darkness that had engulfed Laura with her silvery light...and then Laura and Luna were taken from her only a year later, in a car crash with a drunk driver. A Senator, who would never see the inside of a jail for what he'd done.

Raina had earned the crescent moon scar on her upper arm...for she'd killed him; the man that had taken the two most precious beings in her life. Not with magic. She'd had enough sanity left for that. But she had pleaded to the Goddess in all her deadly forms and asked for justice, knowing that she would pay for her request.

And he died in another car wreck two days later...but this time it was his life that was lost as his car plummeted over Sunset Cliffs.

The next morning, she woke with a bloody, crescent-shaped wound on her arm...it seemed that the Senator had been a very bad man, so the gods had only given her a small reminder for her request.

She had taken the vows of a Healer, that very night. Swearing to heal with her skills, to any and all who asked her aid.

"Raina, hey, are you okay?"

Rapidly blinking her eyes, Raina raised her face from the table she'd been staring at as she wiped it down.

\* \* \* \*

"Rain...I'll stop pestering you, maybe another night..." Loren stepped up beside her friend, the sadness sweeping like a cloak about her shoulders as the sable-haired witch turned from her and headed for the kitchen.

"Yeah, Loren, maybe another night." Raina replied in a tired voice.

Loren had seen her go through periods like this before, where something seemed to drag her down until she shut everyone else out so as not to take them with her. If you pressed her in one of her glooms, she could lash out at you with painful accuracy, her tongue sharper than any sword, for she'd had a lifetime on the receiving end.

One couldn't keep secrets from an Empath. They simply knew your weakest support beams and, if pushed, could knock them out from beneath you without a drop of remorse. The intent wasn't to harm, it was just to get you to back the hell off. To remind you of what Rain was, and what she could do if you kept on her when she was in one of her darker moods.

Loren had been on the receiving end once...

It wasn't something she wanted to feel again.

\* \* \* \*

"Okay...well, then...we'll be across the street if you want to come on over..." Loren offered, making her voice bright, but sincere.

"Thank you, Loren, I'll keep that in mind..." Passing under the beaded doorway, she was lost in the darkness beyond. Her quiet footsteps echoed down the hall as she took the stairs up to her rooms, and the solace of solitude.

Raina had always been what some would call a moody child. Any with a strong touch for other's emotions always were. It seemed some things did not change with adulthood.

Up the stairs, the grandfather clock echoed in the emptiness of the Loft as it chimed twelve times. Each one seemingly fainter than the last, until she could barely hear the twelfth bong as she walked across the tiles of the rooftop patio. The cold, flowered surface against her bare feet grimly reminding her of what her heart must feel like at such times.

Luna love, where are you, on this crescent moon night?

Do you fly beneath the stars on a breeze, or laugh in my mother's arms still as you both look down upon me?

Opening the door to her sanctuary, she stumbled past the doorway, passed the living room, and into the kitchen as pain ripped through her heart.

The kitchen was done in shades of green; moss green for the walls, and the cupboards in forest green with a moss green trim. Even the long table with its high-backed chairs were painted a pale green. Plants hung from each corner, and an herb box in the windows with lavender, thyme, and rosemary.

Lurching across the kitchen's dark, hardwood floor, she made it to the opposite side. Opened

another door painted the same dark green as the cabinets, and into the pantry.

Foodstuffs lined the shelves—canned, preserved, home made and store-bought—but it was the back of the pantry that she was headed for, and the glass cabinet that held what had defeated her native ancestors long before the white man ever claimed to.

Dark bottles of wine, hard liquor and other concoctions slept in this place. Kept in darkness away from those that would jump to the wrong conclusions, and pester her with unwanted and completely unnecessary concerns.

Opening the cabinet, she grabbed a dark blue bottle that held a drink called Moriarty's Finest. A blend of honey mead and cream liquor that tasted of butterscotch on the way down, and didn't give you a hangover in the morning...

She wasn't an alcoholic. She didn't get the shakes if she didn't drink, or the mood swings some went through when denied the stuff. But when memories of the past pressed in on her and started to rip her apart from the inside out, she'd discovered that alcohol, in almost any form, eased the pain quicker than any Healer could. And by the time its affects wore off, the pain from those lost to her usually had too.

Easing the bottle into the crook of her arm, she pressed her other hand to her chest, telling the muscles to stop cramping, for the tension to ease. When had she learned that heartache was a literal term? Her heart squeezing in reply to that silent question as if it meant to rip in half within her.



But as usual, this pain didn't listen to any Healer, least of all herself.

So, she left the pantry. Carefully walking through the kitchen, so another pain wouldn't send her slamming to the floor and down the hallway to her room. Where pain was not welcome, and quickly taken care of in the oldest of fashions.

Looking down at her silver charm bracelet, the pain ripped through her at a knee-bending intensity before she remembered to take it off. Entering her bedroom, she placed the bottle on the floor by the bed, took off her charm bracelet with shaking fingers, and placed the precious piece of jewelry in a small oak box on her nightstand.

Walking into the bathroom, she lit some candles before unbinding her hair. Turning the faucets for the tub, she watched as the waters swirled in the moon's pale light before adding essence of rose and moonflower oil to the swirling mass.

Running fingers through her hair, she felt the waves of the braid's tight creation and the warmth of the fairy bell bound securely with silver threads.

Easing out of her clothes until they were an unorganized pile of wine tones that pooled at her feet, she walked back to the tub, testing the temperature with her wrist. Up the two steps, she eased into the soothingly hot waters, her bare skin glowing copper in the faint light.

Relaxing within the waters, thinking of nothing but the heat that enveloped her and clearing her mind to all else. She searched through the bottles of oils, and lotions on the silver tray that sat at the edge of the

mammoth tub until she found her shampoo. Rosehips and willow leaves, something to soothe the soul.

Working the lather through her hair, she eased into that place beyond pain or regret. Only to come back to life's painful reality when she was leaving the tub a half-hour later with her hair rinsed of conditioner and her body scrubbed clean.

Grabbing a towel for her hair, she semi-dried the long locks, ran a brush through them, blew out the candles, and headed back into her bedroom, her clothes and towel forgotten.

Easing onto the plush bed with its cloud-like comforter, she gazed up at the gauzy white canopy as she listened to the Irish ballad being belted out by the audience from across the street. She tried to imagine herself there, with Loren and her friends, drinking a pint and singing of some lost love written centuries ago.

Feeling her heart starting to shudder with the beginnings of past pain again, she pulled the soft white comforter over her body and turned away from the music.

Picking up the bottle from the floor, she pulled out the cork and took a quick swallow, waiting for the pain to ease, and then took another. Each time, she paused for a shorter moment to gauge the strength of the knives ripping through her chest, until she wasn't pausing at all. Taking swallow after swallow of her friend's sweet ambrosia until she could no longer feel anything but the cloud that she painlessly floated upon and the half-empty bottle resting against her side.

## TWILIGHT CALLING

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*Tower of the South, Fire*

*I call upon you to set the blood of my beloved racing...fuel him with the desire to find me, and take me as his own.*

Oh...Lady love it!

She hoped, as Loki did for the love of Freya, that the words softly whispering in her head weren't from the previous night.

That she had not, indeed, called a Mate to her.

And then she heard it, a soft voice coming from the street below. Caressing her ear with its melodic tone.

Corking the bottle, she rolled it to the other end of the bed as she threw her legs over the side and sat there for a moment, her world nodding slightly to the right, then the left. Raina finally found an uneasy axis on her third eye chakra as she seemingly floated over to the window and opened the moonstone-beaded lace curtains before looking down onto the street.

And there he stood, the stranger that had pulled her so strongly, waiting for her amid the mist from the Bay that had swept into the streets while she had been resting.

His hair was down, flowing about him like some living love as he stared up at her window, his eyes connecting with hers as she parted the curtains. The hunger flared in his eyes like a lighthouse's beacon burning bright into her soul.

She could almost hear her mom's voice from what seemed like another lifetime ago.

*He'll bring you nothing but heartache, my little love, nothing but pain...*

*But I love him, Mama, love him 'til it hurts like a*

*savaged wound in a dying body when we're apart...*

*My Rainbow, he gave you Luna...you should not want more than her, not need more than her breath beside your face as you sleep...*

*But Mama, he said he loved me, that we would always be together...*

*Men say many things...words come easily to them. It's how they act that speaks for their honor, not those things whispered to you in the night...*

*"And I wonder what words this one would say to me?"*

*Anything my love would wish to hear me speak...* Raina jumped as his voice brushed sensuously across her mind. Quickly, she looked over her shoulder to make sure he wasn't standing behind her, his lips brushing lightly against her ear as he spoke.

Returning her gaze to the street, she noted that he still stood there, the mist about him swirling as he breathed in the humid summer air.

"You play games with a witch that you really should not, stranger. Some have been cast out for less." She noted the mischievous smile that spread across his face, making her want to smile in return as he gallantly bowed to her, the déjà vu feeling stirring her to remember each and every detail to put in her journal.

*As the intent of the game is harmless, so is the magic. I would never assume my presence was welcome...in your head, heart, or any other place for that matter...* Raina felt the blush rolling up her neck and across her cheeks before she could stop it, thanking the darkness of her room for hiding it.

"Then you assume correctly, Practitioner. You are neither welcome in my head nor my heart, but the other places have yet to be decided." The words were brazen, and it was more than less the liquor that had loosened her lips to speak so. But it felt good to flirt with a man that she had already decided would never suite her heart. To be able to speak with one of Power and know that you are not found lacking, but intriguing to them.

*Invite me in, dear Lady, and let me see if I can help you decide in this matter...* Her laughter rolled from her throat and down into the street, washing across his face like blessed moonlight and easing into his skin.

"Words, all of them, and you, the most brazen user of their wiles..." Standing in front of the window, she saw him bend to one knee upon the cold street, still dressed in Levi's and cream sweater, placing his hand upon his heart as he spoke.

*"Never would I lie to you...flatter outrageously, mayhap, but never would an untrue word come from these lips to fall upon your ears. Better they to be sewn shut than sully you with a single falsehood."* She noted, somewhere in the more sober part of her mind, that the longer they spoke, the more accented and old his English became, until it was a lilting soft burr of the Highlands that swept over her body like a heated caress.

"Raina, it's Loren, I know you want to be alone..."

Opening her eyes slowly, she lifted her head from the soft nirvana of her pillow, and looked around the still shadow-swept room.

"Raina?"

Oh gods, what a dream! Talk about having a man on your mind. "Loren, hold on one moment..." What was Loren doing back at the Loft? Had something happened? Was she hurt? Gathering her wits, she placed the bottle on the floor by the bed and eased the cloudy, white comforter up under her arms, more for Loren's comfort than her own.

"Come in, Loren. I'm sprawled out on the bed, so don't sit on me." Raina's eyes had always been unaffected by darkness, and it seemed that Loren's night vision was just as good. She saw Loren sweep her gaze through the room as if she looked for someone else in the darkness, before going over and sitting on the side of her bed next to her feet.

What had it been that she'd been trying to remember? All she could recall was the fire that lit his midnight eyes, setting them aglow in the darkness.

Something about the spell...

"Raina, I know how you don't like to talk about the past, and how one should be judged on their actions in the here and now and not what was done before...because people can change, and you'll know it by their actions, but..."

Raina held up a weary hand to ward off the onslaught of words falling rapidly from her friend's lips, wondering what had brought on Loren's sudden case of nerves.

"Hold, Loren, just a moment." Easing up, she leaned against the pale woodcarvings on the backboard of the bed and ordered her mind to focus on the task at hand...and not the dream of a stranger who'd been seducing her with a bend in his lips.

"What or who are you talking about, and why do you seem to think I need to know about it right now?" Even in the dark she could see the worry lines resting on her friend's forehead, and the pinched look about her usually lush lips.

The urge to just shake whatever troubled Loren from her tongue rolled through Raina's mind for a moment, was pondered, and then cast aside. Loren would get to the point in her own time, and the journey there was usually just as enlightening.

Loren ran a tanned hand through her platinum locks, looking around the room, as if still searching for someone. Loren's right hand stayed low by her side.

Something was not well with Loren, not well at all.

Raina eased to a more comfortable sitting position that wouldn't put a cramp in her neck from the upcoming conversation. Her eyes swept quickly across the room as well before she stopped herself.

She'd know if a mouse entered this room, let alone a stranger.

"Loren, I don't know what you're looking for, but your solstice present is in the closet." Seeing Loren's body start with surprise from her words, she took it that Loren had been trying to be discreet about her searching. Or she hadn't known Raina could see so well in the darkness of the room.

Loren placed both hands in her lap as her gaze finally came back to her friend.

"I heard you speaking to someone as I came to the door. I thought..."

"That I had a lover hiding somewhere?" Grinning,

she couldn't stop herself as the chuckle started deep in her throat and rolled across her lips with good humor. "Loren, love, that is one of the lesser worries you have to deal with when it comes to me...but as to what brought you here, when I thought you'd be at the Dubliner?"

"I was. But I got the strangest feeling, and the next thing you know, I'm coming in the front door and hauling up the stairs to your room as if a great beastie were chasing after me..." The uneasy laugh that followed wasn't reassuring, and it died off as quickly as it came.

"About what, Loren?" Raina watched as one emotion after another crossed her friend's face—from worry, to confusion, to defiance, and finally a bit forlorn. Raina wondered if Loren's features would be quite so open if she knew just how well Raina could see in the dark.

"About...well, spells. Raina, you're an adult and all, and I'm not saying this because I don't think you can't handle yourself, but...well..."

Leaning forward, Raina took a lock of Loren's silky hair and tugged softly. "It's all good, Lore. I promise not to be offended. Does that help?"

Nodding, Loren took a deep breath and slowly let it out, a feeling of calm settling about her as she looked at the Healer propped up on the bed.

"You are an amazing creature, Raina, and I've yet to meet your match at some of your stronger or weaker abilities. But when it comes to love and relationships...well...you suck."

Startled, Raina blinked at her for a moment, not



quite knowing how to react to that unexpected statement before deciding that every word Loren had said was pretty damn true.

Grinning, she chortled softly at her friend's tense posture and patted her knee in some kind of reassurance. "If you only knew, Loren...if you only knew."

"But I do! Well, at least for the year that you've been here at the Loft...and after all this time, never going out, pushing those that love you away when you get in these glums and I wonder if you're going to do something drastic, and watching how other men watch you and how you never notice until that ass of a man came into the Loft today..."

"Whoa there, Loren, take a breath!" Sitting up straight, she had been silently agreeing with her friend until that 'ass of a man' part. "I may have some awful taste in men, but..." And then it hit her. Loren knew her mystery man...and not only did she know him, but she held one dark grudge against him.

"Who is he, Loren?"

Loren knew that tone of voice. The no-nonsense, 'tell me now or I'm going to stare you down until you do' tone.

"Loren...who is he and what has he done that has you so set against him?" Had he hurt her at some point? Had they been lovers?

"Nothing to me, exactly, just to those that I know..."

Gods, it was like pulling teeth with her sometimes.

"And what did he do to them, Loren?" The aura of calm around her friend was slowly unraveling into a

panicked jumble of secrets that could not be told and half-truths that must be...and Raina could feel it all.

"Lore-master, skald of my heart, weaver of dreams and flame dancer...you are hiding something from me, and I do not begrudge you that. Just tell me what you can, and I'll make my conclusions from there." Raina's words, like a soothing song, slowly eased the feeling of chaos coming from the beauty at the other end of the bed.

Once again allowing Loren to gather her thoughts, and what she had come to say. "He's just not for you is all. Not that you're not good enough for him...he's just from a different world than you are...of shadows and...and...well, Hades..."

"Are you trying to tell me he's into a bit of the kinkier lifestyle?" Raina was sure that Loren had heard the amusement in her voice, and she hadn't meant it to be there. But all that build up for what? To tell her that the Adonis that'd followed her home today liked leather a bit more than others?

"Raina, I'm serious here! He owns Haven..."

"Yes, I know the club. Half of our patrons live between Haven and the Loft for weeks at a time...do you remember Amber? She used to come in here all the..." Pain lashed out at her. Agony, unmistakable, unending agony, and such a retched desolation...

"By Brigid's Light, Loren, she's dead, isn't she?" Raina felt the raw emotions of mourning roll across her in creaking, hollow, and never-ending waves. Standing up, she rolled her toes into the rich rug beneath her feet instinctively, reminding her that she was safe, at home, in the Loft, and not where her eyes

had taken her...

Pain, such heart-numbing, hope-killing pain. It seemed to go on forever as Raina watched Amber, chained against a dark, stone wall. The smell of mildew spores and old rotting vegetation filling her lungs.

Death hung in the air like a stinking mist, putrid shadows and disease its steadfast companions. She could see the infected greens and angry reds that swirled sickeningly slow in Amber's aura. Her body covered in lacerations of differing lengths and depth. The worst being an infected puncture on her forehead...her third eye chakra...

"Hern protect us..." Raina breathed, "they've taken her eye...Lady no! They've taken her eye!" Loren must have grabbed her as she fell. For the next thing she could see through a misty haze was her star-covered ceiling as they glowed faintly in their zodiac patterns. And Loren leaning over her, gripping her shoulders as if she could physically hold her soul in the body that protected it.

"Raina...gods, Raina! What have you seen?"

The tears that had been gathering in her eyes slid down her face into her hair, clearing her vision somewhat, but her gaze quickly filled with the healing, salty drops again.

"Raina?"

Lifting a hand, Raina touched Loren's shoulder. "I'm okay, Loren, it just hit me a bit unexpectedly, is all." Raina ran her pointer finger across her third eye to clear the last vestiges of the vision. She willfully sent the remainder of the vision from her mind and

into the earth beneath her and skyward, burning it in the stars light.

"What happened? You stood up, your aura faded to nothing, then you started yelling about 'her eye'?"

Gods, in all these years, Raina hadn't sensed it, hadn't felt a glimmer of that particular gift until this night. And it was brought about by a woman that Raina had known by sight and sense but not close enough to bring on such a vision unwillingly...

"I saw her...Amber...dying as she was chained to a wall..." As she knew would happen, she felt Loren draw away from her in horror, in fear of this thing that she did not understand...marking Raina once again as that creature the children had all spurned so many moons ago.

"They took her second chakra, her third eye. I don't know the specifics...wasn't even aware it could be done..." Sitting up, she saw Loren ease away from her. Then the oddest thing happened. Loren's aura, a piece of her soul...something, left Loren's person, started toward Raina for the merest moment, and then sped through Raina's wards, out of the room, and into the street below. Where it went after that, she couldn't tell, as if it faded into the moonlight.

Raina threw up walls she wasn't even aware she had let down in anyone's presence. Rising to her feet, she swayed slightly, and headed for the sanctuary of her bathroom and the cleansing waters of a bath. All the while she kept her gaze on the blue room beyond, not wanting to see the look in Loren's face.

Why now, after so many years, had this curse of a Gift awakened? What in all that was sacred had been

so special about this death and not the others she had heard of in the time since her dad's?

Shaking her head from side to side with quick jerks, she tried to toss the remnants of what she had seen into the ether of another plain, but still some small bit clung to her with an unnerving desperation...

Bright Lady...

Raising her eyes from the blue and gray of the bathroom's rug, she squared her shoulders. Noting in some part of her mind that she was nude, she looked into the scrying mirror her mother had given to her. She'd found her daughter at the age of three gazing into a cup of black coffee and asking who the fairy in her cup was.

Making the sign of an upright star in a circle, an ancient symbol of protection, she cast the circle upon the glass. With her third-eye, she could see the silver line of fire racing from her pointer finger as she cast. The shifting blue of the water elemental. The candle-like flame of the fire. The twinkling star of the air elemental, and the vibrant greens of the earth as she called them to her and requested that they watch over and guard her this night.

But when one called the Lord and Lady, it was a different matter entirely.

She was the Mother of all things, and to Raina, her presence was never truly seen but felt, heart and soul, awed by the Power that had brought about all Creation.

He was the Father, Protector of all Creation. His presence was more like a strong tree, a mountain, or

the feeling she used to get when she was held securely in her father's arms, knowing without any doubt that she was safe and well loved.

It was slightly different for each person as far as she knew; each person related to the Divine in a varying fashion, finding what felt right to them and following it.

She had always felt the Other, from a rainstorm to a baby's birth. They resided in the joy of song and the release of sorrow. In dance and in the act of creating life...

Depending on her needs, she called who she willed. Knowing that the Other didn't give a damn what you called it, them, she, him, as long as you respected what it had created and kept your karma clean.

To focus on a certain spell for love, she would call the Greek Eros. For justice, Hern, or by his more ancient name, Cernunnos, known to the Celts centuries before Christ walked the streets of the Holy Land.

If she felt a connection with that aspect of the Other, then she could call upon them. For if strength of intent did move the spell, belief was surely the creator of it.

Easing her gift, she simply stood before the mirror. Willing whatever it was that was clinging to her to show itself and give its intent.

She had never searched for a spirit in the glass. It was used as a tool to focus her gift of far-sight and when searching or walking the moon paths. But never had she tried to call a creature that was once living

and now departed, even recently. Yet, as she stood before the mirror, her decision to try...felt right. And if a witch learned anything while an initiate, it was to trust your instincts. In some, they were so strong as to be a Gift in and of themselves.

Expanding her senses, she dropped a few of the more dampening shields and knew that any who had the sight would wish they had sunglasses on if they saw her like this. Blazing like some solar firefly as she called to whatever it was, whoever it was, that was tugging on the back of her heels.

A shadowy reflection of herself met and held her gaze for a few heartbeats before she felt her sight shift from her two eyes to the one in the middle of her forehead. Waiting, as the glass in that ethereal realm of the Other slowly began to alter, and another form took its place.

Wavy auburn hair cut short around her shoulders. Dark chocolate eyes. And a creamy complexion as unblemished in the afterworld as she had been the last time Raina remembered seeing her in life. From what she had heard, it was simply an image projected by the spirit, like a picture of the past. Raina was still not certain to this day if her spirit would hold her form when she'd gone to the Summer Land.

*"Raina..." Echoing, like a voice down a deep well, it rolled through her mind in a language that was partly broken, sounds here or there coming through, but not whole words. Her name sounded more like Ray-ah with a white noise droning in the background of her skull.*

*"Yes, Amber, I am here. I am listening; tell me what you will..."*

*"Blind..."*

*"Blind? Why are you blind?..."*

Raina watched as the image of Amber slowly lifted a hand to her forehead where a dark smudge was beginning to form.

*"My sight...took sight..."* Hecate help her, most spirits weren't what you would call great conversationalists, and this newly passed on...

What could she do...?

The element of Earth and Water seemed the most agitated, their presence throbbing as she felt more than heard their desire, their will echoing in her mind like a deep cavern...*Guide her...*

Guide her? This was the first time she had seen a spirit in her scrying glass in all her memory, and the elements were telling her to guide her to...to what! The freaking Light?

*Guide her...* She knew a request when she heard one, and this was not one of them. Why were Earth and Water so adamant about her, when Fire and Air stayed silent?

*"Why can't you guide her?"* Raina asked mutinously...but she knew she would find a way to do as they asked. The Elements had helped her in the past, so she was honor-bound to do the same now.

*"Raina..."*

*"Aye, Amber, I hear you, lost one. Give me but a moment to think..."*

Touching the top space between her eyebrows, she slowly pushed back the headache that was beginning to pound like a circlet of pain around her head and called out to the one creature she knew could do what



the Elements asked of her.

“Luis, love, come to me.” Not a spirit...for he had never lived, but a Construct of the four Elements and a piece of her soul. She had created him when she was all of sixteen and in need of a companion. Not knowing that what she did was supposed to be impossible, something of myth and ancient lore, since no one had ever told her.

In magic, Practitioners are limited solely by their own belief in those limitations. Things like crystals and wands, spells spoken aloud or silently, they were all used to focus the gift and the intent behind the spell. But after a time, you no longer needed the tools to help you focus. You could cast while driving in rush hour traffic with nary a twitch of a finger or word spoken; using the simple focusing of a gift, willing the intent, and sending it off.

She had seen too many with strong gifts that depended on their tools to craft the spell and not on their will. Or those that did know but held sway over others by teaching them to believe that they needed a specific crystal or incense, or even that their gifts could be taken by another. That she hadn't believed was possible...until now.

Feeling a shiver roll down her spine at the thought, she pushed it away forcefully and focused on the task set before her.

Now Luis, having never held a physical form, was not truly a he but whatever form and sex he willed. More often than not, because when she had cast for him, she had seen a 'him', he often appeared as such.

A tall, well-built man in his mid to late twenties

with the palest of skin that glowed beneath the moon's light, midnight hair that streaked to blue as a raven's wing, eyes that changed from one color to another with his moods and, because of her fascination with them since she was a child...a Vampire.

Not the Bela Lagosi, 'I want to suck your blood' type with a black-on-red satin cape. More the charismatic Lestat, just not so homicidal. And her mother's ancestral Celtic brogue to his speech.

But this night, he came to her call in the form of a black wolf with eyes the color of old pewter. His step as silent as the moon's passing through the sky. His presence was like a warm breath upon her hip, a tingling within her palm.

Seeing him as she saw Amber, with more Gift than true sight, she brushed his warm fur with her mind, watching as he swayed beneath her gift-touch.

"Luis, can you see Amber as I do?" Luis had been regaling her with stories for years. About what he saw whenever they passed by the haunted house in Old Town or strolling down the beach in Torrey Pines, glimpses of this or that. Half the time she could sense something but could never get a firm grasp on whatever it was that had caught his attention. But with her being in the circle and scrying mirror, she had no idea if he could sense this spirit who had, for one reason or another, broken the rule of silence that the dead seemed to have about contacting the living and asking for her help.

The wolf turned his head from her to the mirror and back, then opened his mouth in what looked, but

most definitely felt like, a teasing grin.

*"Raina, love, I can not only see her; I can smell, feel, and probably taste her if that was your wish."* Oh, how the two bodiless creatures differed in the way they could communicate.

While Amber had trouble focusing her energy to get the words across, Luis had been created to know how to do just that, if for her and no other. Over the years, he had become a separate being from her; walking in his own Power, as she sometimes called it. She had used a piece of her soul to bring him into being, so her gifts were his gifts, and he knew her every fear and darkest memory as if it were his own. At the same time, he knew her dreams, her hopes and aspirations...and the mischievous streak that ran through her wooly-wild as a child seemed to have been passed on to him three-fold.

"It's not, and you know it." Raina chided. Pausing, she didn't know if it was plausible for him to do what she asked, only hoped it was so.

"Can you lead her to the Summer Land?" That place which she believed all things went when they left their physical forms. From rich to poor, pious to atheist, it was a kind of homecoming from an extended crash course in learning at the school of Life.

*"Yes..."*

"And return to me?" she added, hoping his answer would match the first.

*Yes, love, I think I can.* Thinks he can? Thinks he can!

"Luis, this is not some train in a story book here. Either you know you can or you know you can't. There isn't any room for doubt." The last words came

out choked, and she realized that she was speaking aloud when there was no need to. He would hear her call in a blizzard, halfway around the world while setting a cat loose in a Temple of the Rat in India.

*As I've never tried to go beyond your plain and leave you, love, I can't say I rightly know, now, can I?* The soft burr in his voice reminded her of another, one with eyes of storm-tossed seas to sapphire bright and a lion's mane of hair...

*Here now, you're running with Himself, are you?*

Raina cringed. Damned, peeping-tom construct. She'd not hear the end of it for a good month.

"Luis, don't try and change the subject. Can you or can't you?" As she asked the question, Power rolled through the room. Starting at the window that looked down upon the street in her bedroom and slamming into her room's wards before being recognized as of good intent, to continue on and fill her entire Sanctuary.

"What in the name of all that's Blessed is that?" Raina yelled in surprise.

"Raina, you have a guest."

Spinning on her heel, she turned to the doorway, surprised to find Loren standing there. Her eyes were suddenly fascinated with the swirling patterns in the Persian rug.

"A guest?" Gods, if she'd ticked off Loki in some manner, she sure as his daughter Hel wished he would tell her...

## CHAPTER SIX

Loren didn't know what to say... That Raina had been given this ability and never used it in all the time she'd known her? Silently watched over her for nine years before becoming her friend? That out of the blue, a witch she thought she knew had an ability that could destroy the secrecy kept by both Tribes for thousands of years?

Pulling away from Raina, she sat back on her heels, instinctively hurling the Call outward from herself and more than likely down into the Dubliner. For it would go to the strongest in the pack before the others...and she knew for a fact their Na-meer was there.

Loren hadn't meant to show such unease in front of Raina. But as the Healer got up and walked slowly into the bathroom, completely comfortable in her skin, she knew that she had. And the pain that she had seen in her friend's eyes was more than evident.

Power flowed over her, snapping her head up and over to the bathroom, where Raina now stood. Casting upon the ancient mirror that had been in Raina's family as long as Loren could remember. A

mirror so old, it was better known in myth and fairy tales than fact.

Loren sensed the Elements, as they were called, and the presence of the multiple gods that Raina felt aligned with. But there was something...else.

Standing, she silently crept over to the doorway of the blue-lit sanctuary. Loren kept to the numerous shadows, but knew if Raina wished, she would hear her.

And as she listened, she wished for a million moons that she had not.

\* \* \* \*

“Her eyes they shined like the diamonds,  
As though she were queen of the land.  
And her hair hung over her shoulder,  
Tied off with a black velvet band.”

They all sang the song, some off-key but none caring, as the walls of the Dubliner vibrated with a pub full of drunken, and not so drunk, patrons that raised their voices to the chorus. Singing in Ireland was not a spectator sport...

The Dubliner was a new pub, just opened up in the spring, but already it had a faithful following for the Irish bands that played there, and the food was better than most.

Jagur, Na-meer of the Utameer, chosen by the Honor of his actions and the Power he had been born with, was still ruminating on his encounter with the Che-awk of the Lang a few hours past.

Janel, or whatever name she chose once she was Awakened, was still sleeping off whatever spell that had been laid softly upon her brow.

They'd told him that she would remember nothing of her time with them, that she was a creature of Honor. So they had chosen to honor her in the same fashion. And that they were protective of her, a child of Earth and Water...never had he heard of such a thing.

If it was a trap, it was a well-laid one, for he could not sense the snare.

And Loren, Guardian of the witch across the street, had been agitated when she came into the pub, and even more so when she had suddenly left his side, pushing the wooden chair back with a screech in her haste to rise. Neither looking left nor right as she quickly weaved between chairs and tables for the door, knowing she wanted to just jump the obstacles and be done with them, for he felt her unease...

So he wasn't truly surprised when the Call came to him, wrapping about his mind. But the fear that it held, the agony and doubt, brought him to his feet. He sent out a light probe toward the Loft as he headed for the door; waving down the others with a single shake of his hand, and moved into the quiet shadows of the Loft across the street.

Extending his senses once again, all he met were the wards that the witch kept around her place of Power. They were stronger than he had expected, never having truly tested them before. He had been told by others in the pack that it felt like a slight resistance as they walked through the door, and it

eased away once they were on the other side. As if it were testing their intent, and whether or not to blast them out the door before they could cause any harm.

But the wards were solid now, letting nothing enter, which meant that she was either casting or prepared for a battle yet unknown to him.

*Loren, is all well?* Nothing, as amazing as it seemed, it appeared the witch's wards could even block their telepathic channel; which unto this night had been unheard of.

Walking up to the locked door, he pressed his hand against the wall of Power that softly hummed within his mind.

All in all, it came down to the same thing. He had to make sure that Loren was all right, and he only knew of one way to ask.

Building up the Power around him, he focused on Loren, using her as a point of reference within the building. Calling the force of his gifts, tempered by his will, he felt the hairs on his body rise. The air about him changed, as waves of water seemed to bend the building in front of his eyes, swirling about him as he gathered strength then released it.

Throwing his will behind the surge, a loud astral knocking on the door of her wards, he waited for her to allow him entrance. But all remained silent, her wards in place, until something, gone as quickly as it had come, recognized him for who he was and gave entry.

What in all that's growing was that?

Shaking off the question until another time, he opened the front door and was through the rooms, up



onto the tiled patio and down the hallway of her sanctuary before someone not of the Tribes could have gotten to the Loft's library.

Sensing Loren in the back room, he also knew in that moment that she was not in danger, but that this room was warded as well, stronger than he'd ever come across, and it would take a stripping of his gifts to get him in without her consent.

The numb could walk through wards with just the slightest feeling of unease that would trail them as long as they stayed in the room, never recognizing what it was, or why it was that they felt it.

Those that had recognized and used their gifts were bound by another set of rules. If you tried to cross over wards that did not wish you to do so, it was an act of dishonor. With the stronger wards, unless he wanted some major head pain and dishonor to the Utameer, he would have to leave his Power at the door.

The stronger the gift to recognize wards and things of Power, the stronger its affect on you. And Jagur had always been highly gifted in sensing wards...

\* \* \* \*

Raina sensed one of Power at her closed door as Loren did, for they both looked in that direction at the same time.

Loren's aura faded with her unease, as Raina tried to hold the concentration necessary to will the casting in place, hold the circle of Power, and defend her wards against whatever was on the other side of her

door.

Multi-tasking...gotta love it.

*Luis, keep Amber close to you, I don't want to lose her. She's spent so much energy just to get this far...*

*Aye, love, she'll be snug tight with me. Take care of your man...*

*My what!*

"Loren, are you well?" They both jumped at the voice that flowed through the room with its Australian accent, foreign to Raina but obviously known to her friend.

Loren looked to her for a moment, waited for the nod of the Healer's head before easing silently over to the door and opening it.

"Yes, brother, I am well." Easing a bit back into the bathroom, beyond the sight of the door, Raina used his close contact to her room's wards to get a feel for him and what type of witch he was that he could go through her casting wards with such ease.

\* \* \* \*

Jagur sensed that the witch was in the room, could smell the rosewater in the shampoo that she used floating about his senses.

With a quick glance, he noted the well-kept Persian rugs, the enormity of the canopy bed, and antique-looking armoire and rocking chair. He searched the room quickly for an altar, and was surprised not to find one.

What kind of witch was she, that she did not have a sacred place for her casting?

Loren felt what he was doing, breathing in the room as he would the scent of the ocean and all the living things within it. She didn't know if Raina would be offended by the breach in privacy, but she had the feeling that she would. This was Raina's sanctuary, and she was one of the few that had been invited into it.

*Tower of the North, Earth...*

Raina shook her head as a new part of the casting from the night before drifted through her mind. Why now of all times did she have to play chase with her memory?

Well, skulking in the bathroom wasn't going to get her back to Amber. Grabbing the silk bathrobe one of her patrons had given her when they had come back from Japan, she caressed the silver dragon on the back before putting her arms through the long black sleeves and tying the sash securely around her waist. The silk robe swirled about mid-thigh as she inhaled, straightened her spine, and took the step forward that would bring her into the bedroom, and his line of sight.

She hadn't known what she was expecting from that foreign accent and rolling voice, but never in all her dreams had she thought to find one that looked so much like a memory from long ago. The midnight hair, the strong, solid build, a chest she could rest her head upon and listen to the steady beat of his heart as it slowed from their lovemaking. The one that had told her of his never-ending love in soft, poetic tones a million tears ago. How they would always be together, whom she would have gladly thrown away

her honor and all else she held sacred for...

\* \* \* \*

Jagur felt his heart stop as the witch showed herself to him; her sable tresses falling freely to her hips. The silk wrapped around her curves like a second skin, hugging her form as if it were cloaked in shadow and nothing more.

She was tall for a woman, almost six feet, with skin kissed by the sun, and a form that reminded him distinctly of the Lang with her long legs and graceful line to every curve. If not for the fact that he knew she was not...yet when he took a deep breath, nostrils flaring slightly as he scented her...Jagur willed her to take the few steps closer so that he could see her eyes. He smelled the woods and ocean, warm fur and the adrenaline of running with the pack under a full moon...

As she took a step toward him, silently answering his request, the spell that had called to him the night before wrapped around him tightly, chanting through his mind that this was the one that had sent the Compelling. This was the one that he could call mate for the rest of her life, sleeping beside her on cold winter nights, running with her beneath the moon...giving him sons and daughters to hold tightly to his chest, protecting them from harm...

He lunged forward, through the doorway, instinct guiding his steps more than true intent, and as the wards screamed through his mind one moment, they were silent the next, Raina's will negating them as

Loren cried out for him to stop.

And then he was through, falling to one knee as his senses reeled at what he had just done and the intoxicating presence of the witch before him.

As unannounced as the Compelling had come, it dissipated into the ether, leaving him wondering if what he had felt was but a moment of insanity or if he had truly just forced his way through her shields, uninvited.

"You're either very brave, very numb, or very stupid for doing that, brother of my friend." Catching the urge then, with a sigh, releasing it, she let her hand reach out and touch the top of his head. The black hair, silky soft against her fingertips, fell straight and long down his back to rest just above the black belt on his jeans.

Looking up, her face was cloaked in deeper shadow, yet he could make out every line as if from some dream, every curve from a memory he did not recall having until this moment.

The breath hitched in her throat when she saw his eyes up close, the same glowing amber and thick black lashes, the same dimple in his chin, and slight crook in the high part of his nose. Ruining the perfection, but giving him a more touchable beauty.

And was there a knife scar behind his left ear? Where a sacred blade, an athame, had made its mark?

Unknowingly, her breathing changed, becoming frantic and pain-filled as a slightly shaking hand slowly pushed back the hair from his neck while his body vibrated with its utter stillness, allowing her to discover what she willed.

Turning his chin slightly away from her to the right, he complied with her silently, her touch, no matter how oddly it was given, sending shivers up and down his spine as she stood over him.

\* \* \* \*

Raina held a position of dominance, and Loren wondered if Raina could possibly know how many times he had allowed this...perusal of himself...as she was doing right now.

Searching, Raina's eyes lit upon ears that held the same curve to them, a neck that was lean and strong, just as she had remembered, and there behind his ear was the thin line she had remembered from a decade prior. Yet he had not aged; he was exactly as she recalled him every night for years after his disappearance.

"The gods surely play tricks with me tonight...and I will not play their games!" She had to be dreaming, as she had before when she had seen her blond-haired stranger down in the street. This was not happening, this could not be happening!

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly, demanding that she wake up from this hellish dream, safe in the quiet of her sanctuary.

Opening her eyes slowly, he was still there. She could still feel the pull of the spell in the bathroom and Luis somewhere at the fringes of her gift. Loren still stood at the door, and the one that looked so much like Him was still kneeling before her.

Okay, it could be a glamour, an illusion, but she

had the sinking feeling that it was not. That somehow, this stranger who Loren called her brother was the very same man who had given her Luna all those years ago.

"Jagur?" The witch spoke his name so softly that he wasn't sure the witch had said it or if it was an echo in his mind from some dream he didn't recall.

She said nothing more, just took a step back away from him, walked into the bathroom, and shut the door, closing out the world that was slowly going absolutely crazy.

Walking into the peace of her bathroom, noting that it, at least, had not changed, Raina called Luis to her, set the spell on the mirror again, and then called Amber. But nothing happened.

"Oh, for the love of All!" Slamming her fists down on the countertop, she flung out her senses, searching for Luis. Skipping over Loren and the other's Power, she felt Luis, and something else that felt like Amber had while she had been casting.

*Luis...*

*Yes, love...*

*Guide her where she needs to go if you can. If you can't, bring her back with you to the Sanctuary, and we'll have to think of something else...*

*Yes, love...*

*He was being too meek and consolatory...*

*What are you up to, Luis?*

*I thought you had enough on your plate. We'll talk when I return...*

*Yes, love...* Raina said it with a smirk on her face but gratitude in her heart.

But then his words before she had met this new stranger filled her ears...*your man...*

*Luis, you knew him before he left me. Is that Jagur out there, or a glamour of some sick mind?*

Feeling him brush up against her side, she leaned into the warmth that he generated and took a deep breath, waiting for his answer.

*If it looks like Jagur, feels like Jagur, tastes like Jagur...then it's Jagur...*

What had she expected from him, a straight answer?

*Come back to me soon...or else I'll be a might upset with you, Luis...*

*Enough to put me in a box again for six months?*

He was never going to let her live that down.

"Go..." Waving her hand in his general direction, she closed the circle quickly, then thanked and released the elements to go where they would. When all was done and peace reigned once again, at least in this room, she brought her fingers to the middle of her brow and concentrated on what she needed to do next.

Well, she did have company...wanted or not.

Wishing she had something else a little less revealing to put on, she shook her head at the thought. Reminding herself that if this was her Jagur, he had seen her nude before. But she had just been eighteen then...and now she felt closer to eighty.

Taking a deep breath, she once again squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and opened the door, not sure what she would find on the other side.

Loren curled up in the fetal position beneath him



on the floor was definitely not it...

\* \* \* \*

Jagur studied the Healer as she did him, turning his head to the side when the light pressure of her thumb asked him to do so. But whatever it was she had been searching for, she had not liked what she had found. For she'd taken a step away from him, turned her back on them, and went into the other room, firmly closing the door.

He replayed this scene over and over in his mind, trying to find what it was that had caused her to cast them from her circle of acknowledgement, to turn her back on them with only a single word.

"I offended her when I lunged through the wards, Loren; I know this. But it hadn't been my intent." Loren nodded her head as they sat on the rug with their backs to the bed, facing the bathroom.

"Raina seemed to close you out when she looked at your neck, Jagur. What could she have seen there?" Lifting her sensitive fingertips, she ran them over the side of his neck, his eyes never leaving the door as she sought for what it was that had so upset Raina. And then there, at the base of his ear and slightly behind it, was a thin line, a scar, that can only be left by an athame, a sacred blade.

He had come across, and against, a witch of Power. He was lucky that this was all that remained of the encounter.

"All I feel is a scar, nothing more."

Nodding his head, he'd thought that was what had

set her off, but needed the confirmation from another. He still had no memory of where the scar had come from. One night it had not been there, and the next day, it was.

"Did I hear correctly? Did she use my name?"

Loren hadn't been sure that she had heard Raina either, that it had not been a memory of something past. But if he had heard it as well... "I heard her say something. But if it was your name... I've never said it in anyone's presence but the Uta..." Before she could finish her thoughts, she was on the floor, Jagur leaning over her, a fire lit in his eyes.

"And do you mention the tribes to her, Loren, as you do not my name?"

Loren didn't know what was going on in his head, but there was something there that hadn't been there before. A fighting of wills behind his eyes...

"Get off Loren, or I'll make you wish..." Raina's words died on her lips as he looked up, the rage in his eyes...and the magic of another. One that she should recognize...

"Wish what, witch? That I was never born? That I had never come here this night?" Anger flowed over him, reaching her senses like a biting on her skin, but beneath the anger she felt the confusion that fueled it.

"If that is you, Jagur Lochloman, you'd do better to remember what happened the last time we clashed wills. Or your next scar will be in a more visible place, so that you won't forget so quickly." Pain seared through her heart as she spoke his name aloud for the first time in almost a decade. But it had rolled off her tongue with familiarity...as if her tongue, at least, had

not forgotten the feel of his name upon it.

Loren felt him tense before he lunged off her toward Raina, the grab she made for his leg a useless one, as he had always been faster than her.

One moment he had been atop Loren; the next, she was having the air pushed from her lungs as her body slammed onto the rug-covered floor. His body half covered hers as he pinned her hands on each side of her head, his breath fanning her face in a fast pant as he studied her features, the confusion now plainly written on his face.

"Who. Are. You?" His lack of memory where she was concerned knifed through her heart with more force than she had thought possible. The pain must have registered in her eyes, for his grip on her wrists eased and his breathing slowed to a more normal pace.

*Have there been so many then, Jagur, that you have forgotten me so completely?* Her voice whispered through his mind as her touch did through his senses, bringing to mind dreams and half-remembered fantasies. But he would never have forgotten her, not even if they had spent a single night together...and from the pain that was rolling over his skin, he had a feeling she thought it had been many more.

"I've never forgotten a single face or the scent of their skin. Yet your face is one that I've only seen in dreams. You were younger in them, a flower yet to bloom into the beauty that you've become...but still, it was you."

Gods, he thought her nothing more than a fantasy! She heard the truth in his words, felt them flowing

over in her mind and recognizing them as such. He truly did not recall their time together, as if...

A spell...

\* \* \* \*

Jagur was trying with all his will to concentrate on the witch's words, but the mouth that formed them kept distracting him. The chest that moved beneath him to speak the words rubbed against his shields, caressing him with a familiar vibration. Everything about her drew him, and he knew it not to be her magic for it had left him when he'd passed through her wards to fall at her feet.

What played through his blood now had everything to do with the female beneath him, and nothing more.

"Where do you recall being back in '91, Jagur? Why have you not changed? You are exactly as I remember you. As if you've taken a step from my memories to torment me as you crush me to the floor." The only words that registered in his entirely distracted mind were torment...and floor.

Yes, they were upon the floor, with her lying so softly beneath him. And if they had been lovers, then maybe a brush of her lips would bring back something more to his lagging memory...

\* \* \* \*

"Jagur?" Raina watched as his amber eyes changed from a sparkling amber to a dark molasses, just before

his head dipped and his lips brushed feather soft against hers.

For a moment, she was taken back to the first time they kissed, her first kiss, in the field out behind the house where she had been casting.

He'd come up behind her, letting her turn, startled in his arms, her athame nicking his neck as she instinctively moved to confront him. Pain had flashed quickly across his eyes before he'd brushed his lips softly across her innocent mouth. He'd said something asinine like the will of her Power had called him to her, and she had laughed, kissing him in return. For the moon before, she had cast for a lover.

"No!" Jerking her face away from him, she shoved a knee into his groin, a flash of victory sweeping across her pride and easing some of the wounds that had been open and sore for too many years as he rolled away from her to lie curled up on his side. Sitting up, she folded her legs in front of her and stared at the lover that had brought her such incredible pain...and unforgettable joy.

"Not again. Never again."

The anger in her quietly spoken words, chilled with pain slowly battered away at his will until he heard nothing but the unsteady beating of his heart as he wound his shields more tightly about his body

Raina felt the hot flood of righteousness flow through her veins just before she was once again flattened against the floor, this time by Loren shoving her in the side before tumbling off to crouch a few feet away.

"Raina...this is not your way!"

Sanity returned with those words and, with them, the sorrow that had been stalking her for most of the night.

Damn.

Rubbing a hand over her literally aching heart, she eased up once again to a sitting position and longingly looked at the dark place beside the bed that was hiding her bottle of sweet oblivion. But now was not the time, even if it was the usual place, so she needed to bury the pain until she was alone to deal with it.

The downside to being an Empath and a Healer to boot, you feel everything ten times stronger than someone that wasn't. Ten times the pain, ten times the joy, and half the time it wasn't even her emotions she was feeling.

To say that she was moody would be a massive understatement. And the control she had been forced to learn to survive without serious medications not only submersed her sensitivity to others' emotions, but her own as well. And it was situations like these, when stress and chaos took its toll, that her control of her emotions thinned and, well...melt down. A loss of control was unacceptable to her, or any other Practitioner, and she would be paying Karma for it.

Standing, she took the few steps to Jagur and leaned over at the waist, touching his forehead with her index finger and whispering a spell of Easing.

Straightening, Raina took a step away from him as she watched his body relax, the lines of pain eased from his face, and his aura once again flowed easily about him. Swirling madly with all the shades of

every emotion, the colors blurred until they steadied, seeping into the muddy brown of confusion, the scarlet of anger, and the stark ebony of pain.

To another, the colors they saw might be completely different. For it was how the Empath related the colors in their own mind, that recognized the shades in others' auras.

But, that was one of the things she loved about Gifts. They didn't often listen to textbooks or others' opinions; the heart and soul held their most avid attention.

\* \* \* \*

Jagur felt the spell like a cool rain against his skin, erasing the burn marks to his shields and pain from his head. His skin tingled, sensing that whatever she had cast still worked upon him, until the last trace of fatigue and stress left him, leaving him in a state of sated relaxation.

When his gaze found her in the shadowed room, she had begun to walk away from him, then turned on her heel and headed back again, the rug absorbing the sound her feet on the wooden floor. But he could still feel the vibration through the floorboards as her steps were at one moment agitated; and the next, soft and staggered.

Back and forth she paced, from window to bathroom to window again, her mind flowing from what she had done to what needed to be done still. Yes, the bigger picture; she recognized that her issues were but a side show compared to the main event.

Spells! What she had almost done still made her heart skip a beat whenever she glanced up to see him watching her.

His amber eyes tracking her as she moved from one end of the room to the other, wondering what kind of witch she was, that she could cause him such pain without true intent, and yet he was still be drawn to her...a mystery...some new distraction? But something whispered in the back of his heart that she could be so much more.

\* \* \* \*

"Jagur, stop tracking me like some leopard ready to pounce."

The look that both Jagur and Loren shared was lost on Raina as she turned her back to them and headed once again across the floor.

"First and most importantly, I've sent a guide with Amber's spirit to take her to the Light, the long tunnel, the stairway to Heaven...whatever." Rubbing the space between her brows, she concentrated on the swirling patterns in the rug and not the two people sprawled on the floor...Loren always did like to sprawl...

Bless it, she couldn't think with him here and a million other voices rolling through her mind now that she'd once again used her Gift for hearing the dead. It was like advertising in the obituaries for the freaking deceased to come and pay her a call.

"And...and all we can do is wait for him to return to me before I can go any further with that road."



Raina finished.

"Him?" Jagur asked.

Raina noted that he hadn't asked about the guide when she'd mentioned it, but 'him'. Typical.

"Yes, when he chooses to be...moving on..." Raina said with exaggerated slowness.

"What do you mean when he *chooses* to be?" Jagur was going to get stuck on this one wasn't he; he just had to know every little detail.

He had known of Luis, and if Raina recalled correctly, he hadn't been too fond of Luis for the short time that they had been in each other's company.

Well, at least some things never change.

"As I was saying, the next thing we need to deal with is why Amber was attacked, by whom, and how in all that is Blessed did they take her freaking Eye!" As she said the last word, her hand instinctively covered her forehead, warding off any harm to that chakra from once again saying the words aloud.

Words had Power, whether to heal the soul or steal it. In the way of things, it was much the same.

Jagur and Loren watched her as she continued to pace, running one thought through to completion, discarding it, and trying another. Her steps becoming slightly less agitated as each possibility was cast aside.

"I have never heard of such a thing, but I have never heard of many things. So it doesn't make it impossible. For one to bind a person, they have to by oath or belief that it is possible to be bound. So, it would then make sense that if they made her truly believe that they could take her Third Eye, then she

gave them, in her belief, the Power to do so." Nodding, it made sense.

It was the reason why spirits could not communicate with those that did not believe in them. For a mortal can't hear or feel what they don't believe in...effectively blocking that sense with their disbelief. Kind of like using denial as a coping mechanism, and disbelief was one of the strongest shields she had ever run across.

What was it they said about an open mind...and parachutes?

Using one's sixth sense was much the same as it was with magic. Except she'd seen those that didn't believe in magic affected by it...both good and bad.

Stopping a few feet from them, she folded her legs and sat down, a frown of concentration on her face as she flew through pages of books that she had read over the years in her mind's eye, storing volumes in her memory for just such an occasion.

A sort of photographic memory...who said magic wasn't practical?

Blinking her eyes to clear the last of the pages from her sight, she raised her gaze to the two silent figures, their gazes intent on her person until she returned their gaze.

Loren's eyes automatically dropped to the floor for the briefest second before returning to hers, but Jagur's...well, what had she expected.

"I'm not in the mood to play dominance games with you right now, Jagur, so I'll take it as your poor manners and go on with what I was going to say." Will as she might, she could not take her gaze from

his, would not lower it or look away as he watched her, molasses eyes unblinking as if they sought...something.

"I've read nothing of such a spell, though it being of the darkest of sorts, that could be why..." Noting Loren's silence and how he still stared, she knew, for one reason or another, that this was a test. One that she would only have a single chance to pass...

Damn him, what was going on? Where was the charming rogue she had known so many years ago? Had her memory painted a picture of something that he truly was not?

And why, for the entire freaking day, had she felt like she was the only one that didn't know the plot of this story and hadn't been given her script?

Noting that he still stared, she squared her shoulders, accepting that for one reason or another, he wished to have a staring contest in her Sanctuary, her place of Power, and they could go no further until she had done so.

"If I remember correctly, you used to win this game a lot when I was eighteen." Focusing her will, she thought of a biting sea wind blasting against his eyes, the stinging salt spray making his eyes water, as the wind lashed his hair about his face like a wet cat-o-nine tails.

She saw his eyes water, but still they held true to hers, his Power engulfing her for his turn.

She saw sand, a storm of it, as it blew into her face, rubbing like sand-paper across her eyes, burning her skin raw as the sun glared like some avenging elemental from the skies above.

But she recognized it for the illusion it was, eyes lightly misting as another came to mind, one that brought real tears to her unwavering gaze.

Wiping the closed seams of her eyes, Raina willed Luna's face to leave her be for a bit, until she once again had the bottle and was alone to wander through her memories in blessed silence. Feeling the memory release her clenching heart and easing it...for now she took a deep breath, and then another. Opening her eyes, Raina found Loren kneeling next to her and Jagur standing by the window, looking into the night sky.

"As I was saying, unless you have some suggestions, we need to figure out the how of the spell, and that might help with the who."

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

Jagur didn't know when he realized that there was a babe in her arms, a full head of pitch-colored hair and tawny skin curled protectively beside her, one small arm reaching upward to tug on her hair. The babe's face turned toward him, and he looked down to see the amber of its eyes...and then it was gone.

He stood by the window, the stars in the sky so much brighter now that everyone was asleep and the cities streetlights were dimmed low for energy conservation.

He had dropped his gaze, and in all truth, he didn't mind. For it meant she was truly a witch of Power,

one that could be inducted into the ranks of those few that knew what they were. It was what he had seen that bothered him, tugging at his heartstrings as nothing had in all his faulty memory.

He knew instinctively that the babe had been his; the girl child with the amber eyes and raven hair. But from the agony he had felt rolling off Raina when he rose, he knew that there was only one reason why the child was not with her now.

Damn his memory! Why didn't he recall her or anything about their time together?

\* \* \* \*

"Yes, that would seem the most logical route..." Loren said unsurely, her eyes focused on the man by the window, wondering what she could do to ease the pain she felt slowly beginning to roll from him in shallow waves.

"Then we are agreed," Raina said. "I know a few practitioners at the Station, they'll know who can handle this with the most discretion."

Loren knew that Jagur wouldn't want the police involved in any way, let alone one that practiced the Craft. But what could she say? 'No, Raina, you can't go to the cops; Jagur's a wanted man?' Or how about, 'He doesn't have a green card? Or a birth certificate...or a driver's license...'

*'There is a darkness that is killing our kind, and we know it's taken some of yours as well, but as you Lang are of Air and Fire, there were no bodies left to return to you...'* Had he said those words to the Lang leader

just hours ago? It felt more like days...

"Brother, what do you think? Should Raina ask her *Police* friends to help?" The emphasis Loren put on the word 'police' pulled him from his ruminations. There would be time and plenty for them once he was alone.

"No, luv, no police. We'll handle this within the...group." All had sworn, as had he, not to reveal what they were, no matter the reasons or the circumstances. Only once Raina had the approval of both Tribes and the Council could she be told.

"What do you mean, no police? This isn't the freaking dark ages. They don't burn witches here anymore," Raina griped.

"That you know of." The words were dark and full of foreboding, but it was the look in Jagur's eyes as he turned to her that sent chills down her spine.

"There is much you live in ignorance of, Healer. May you continue to do so." Raina didn't like the sound of that, nor the premonition. With those words, her life path was going to make a drastic leap off the trail into the impenetrable mist that had begun to gather on either side. Like some gaping maw in the world she knew once as her reality.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Raina watched as Loren and Jagur walked out the door, silent as the shadows that surrounded them. It occurred to her that none of them had turned on a light, and yet all of them had seen well enough not to mention it.

Rising to her knees, she arched her back and felt the stress build right before the vertebra popped back into place with a sharp snap. Gaining her feet, she walked over to the bed, sprawled across the white down comforter, and grabbed for the bottle she had been working on earlier in the night.

Jagur was here, had been just across the street from her for how long, and she had never felt him. Never felt the tug that she once had whenever he had been even at the farthest reaches of the ranch.

He had changed in the past decade. Surprisingly enough not in image, but the once-charming flirt that had called her his mate was now some dark stranger...that still kissed like Eros himself, true. But all the other things that she remembered loving about him...his easy smile, the child, the flirt...they were gone.

Why had Loren never mentioned her brother Jagur? Why had she never mentioned having a brother at all? Let alone one that was local that had never come into the store, or called, or had a friend come to get her...anything.

She had thought they were close...obviously not.

Uncorking the bottle once again, she took a sip of the liquor, letting it roll over her tongue and encase it in the sweet and creamy richness that had propelled its popularity. Gods, yesterday had been normal, the usual huff and puff that goes on every day running the Loft. It all started to fall apart this morning with the hangover from Loki's most perverse dreams, and the Stranger...

Damn, she hadn't gotten his name.

Only that he was the owner of Haven...

Well, easy enough to find out in the morning when one of her Gypsies, for a lack of a better word, stopped by. Those brooding creatures that seemingly lived between the Kestrel's Loft and Haven. What they did to pay for their food and coffee, she didn't really mind, as long as they weren't harming themselves or others doing it. And she had never gotten the feel from them that they were, just that they were completely exhausted. Burning the candle at both ends, so to speak.

Taking another sip, she rolled it over her tongue, wondering for the thousandth time why she couldn't have a more practical gift like brewing. When it came to potions, lotions, incense, soaps, and cooking...no problem. But try and get her to brew anything but that retched Black Water, and it came out like some



kind of firewater that burned the innards until you lost your cookies in a bush.

Moriarty said it had something to do with her being a fire sign...

Bringing the bottle to her mouth again, she felt her body relax into the floating-on-a-cloud feeling that she got when she was either drinking or about to Astral. And knew she needed to cork the bottle and go to bed for what remained of the night.

Corking it, she carefully placed it on the floor by the bed and curled onto her side, relishing the relaxed feeling, the pain in her head and shoulders almost completely gone.

And her heart, well, her heart was about as confused as it had been in a decade or so and didn't have time to bother her with her head so full of what she needed to do in the morning.

*Ladylove, I'm back...* Luis called.

"Hello, doll, how did it go?" Closing her eyes, she could see him behind her lids like an outline of a man behind a sheet, a silvery light surrounding him, forming his shadow.

*Well, Rainbow, she's on her way to the Summer Land...her Guardian was waiting for her when I came to the Maze...*

Rolling onto her back, she felt the heat he often exuded in her presence as he curled up next to her, resting his head on her shoulder and throwing an arm over her waist.

"The Maze?"

*Aye, or the best word for it that I've found. There is no official name; just a bank of fog I could not see into, thicker*

*than a stubborn man's head...*

Well, what had she expected? She knew of the Guardians, spirit guides, angels...whatever you chose to call them...but this was the first she'd heard of the other-planar fog bank.

*Sleep, love, you're going to need it. I'll guard your dreams 'til you wake...*

Rubbing her head into the pillow, she used her Healer's touch to brush her lips across the top of his head before curling into him.

*"Love you, Luis..."*

*As I you, my brown Colleen. As I you...*

\* \* \* \*

Aidan knew that something was not right with his witch. He could feel her agitation, a picture of her pacing up and down some Persian carpet, the only image he could capture that made any sense.

Everything else seemed to be from some fairy tale, with magic mirrors, ghosts, and spells, all jumbling together inside his head with the taint of a divine brew called Moriarty's Finest...

Spells, he loved the brew. He actually kept quite a few bottles of it in his rooms at Haven, as well as in the penthouse.

He'd gone to her as she dreamed, the picture of her coming to the window; bare as the day she was born and cloaked only in shadows and the moonstones and lace of the curtain. For a second, it'd taken the wit from his tongue as a hunger, both male and Lang, filled him. Robbing him of his nimble words, and the

invitation he had been hoping for.

When the Lang had all returned to Haven, the Loyal had been waiting for them.

Evan had been far from uncomfortable for the noble thing he'd done. Even Layla, after greeting him with a touch on his arm had gone to Evan, sitting down at the Dark Angel's feet and rubbing her cheek against his knee in a soothing manner. So, there he had sat for a few hours, drinking a venti chai as he watched the dancers on the floor. Waiting for a response from the Council before he would be able to take any kind of action. They all remembered the Burning Times, the Inquisition, the Crusades...and none of them wanted to see a new title for some chapter in a history book created. The Lang may be near to immortal, but many that sustained their present lifestyle were not.

Vengeance favored the patient...

But Aidan didn't try to deceive himself in the actions that would be taken against those that had dared to snuff out the flame of one of the Lang, known to him or not. They were all family—'All for one and one for all'—and it would be a personal vendetta in the hearts of Langlowlawk and Loyal to make sure those responsible were taken from this plane. So those that waited in the after-realm could rip them apart for all eternity...

Staring at the black silk ceiling over his head, he knew that dark thoughts would get him nowhere, dwelling only made one insane with their inability to change the past.

So he'd closed his eyes and brought to mind a more pleasant image, one with sable hair and twilight

eyes.

And as a reflection of her face had formed, he'd known that she slept in some hazy, altered state. That now would be the perfect time to walk the moon-path to her dreams and see if her subconscious was more receptive to his advances than her stubborn pride.

And he had not been disappointed.

She had flirted with him, like some night flower opening its petal to the moon, and just as he was going to have the most interesting conversation in her room, the damn shape shifter gets involved.

Well, the Utameer always had been a bit more possessive of the witches than the Lang. They never were very good at sharing.

But...wasn't that why their Tribes had been changed to what they were now, altered for all eternity because of a death that should not have happened...

At least, that was what Clio had always told him. And Clio being a Keeper of the Line, Muse of History, she should know...

The fact that she might be lying to them, or seeing it from a completely biased perspective never crossed his mind, for she had taken a vow, as all the Keepers had, to record their history and the Lang's ancestral line without bias; an oath made was an oath kept.

If there was one thing more useless than a blind man's opinion of the Mona Lisa, it was a creature without honor. Without it, they were nothing more than a waste of flesh, carrying a shit-load of bad Karma and smelling up the place.

He remembered when he had first been told of the

Tribe of Fire and Air and how they had been cast from the skies for the loss of the Sacred.

How some of the creatures who were one with Earth, the Uta, joined with those of Water, Na-meer, and became the Utameer. A tree-hugging, water-loving, bunch of nature sprites that saw the creatures of Wind, the Che-awk, and Fire, the Langlolan, as something outside of nature...something without honor. For the Che-awk drank in the Power of the storms that tore apart their precious fields, and the Langlolan danced in the flames that scarred their trees. But what was life without death?

So some of the Langlolan and Che-awk joined together as well, while others of their kind faded into the shadows to watch the game play out from a safer distance.

And as the Utameer built their cities in caves beneath the earth within their place of Power, the Lang played beneath the stars.

Returning to Raina, he could once again see her face, now turned on her side as she was curled up in her bed against...something.

A warm shadow of a creature that rested his head beside hers, an arm thrown over her waist as he waited for her to fall asleep and watch over her dreams.

A warm shadow? A creature that held no form, but emitted heat?

Spirits had always held a bit of a colder touch to his reckoning, for they used the energy about them to walk within this plane. Yet this one exuded heat like a furnace against her skin, and his shadow of a form

possessed an aura that radiated along her, wrapping her in his wards, vibrant greens and golden yellows. Ruby red and azure blue tones that swirled and mingled like a pack of multicolored pixies as they danced drunkenly around one another.

What kind of creature was this?

Shaking his head at the number of oddities that had begun to happen since he had met his witch, he stood and silently called the rest of the Lang to him as he started for the stairs.

They had planning to do, favors to call in...and if the gods willed it...Vengeance.

\* \* \* \*

Raina fell asleep with Luis's heat flowing against her, and maybe for that reason, she had no more visions of Amber or the voices that had slowly been growing louder in the back of her head.

She woke with the sky, scenting the dawn on the wind that lightly tapped against her window, urging her to rise. Rubbing her eyes, she quickly opened them as she recalled the previous night, and the reunion with Jagur.

Had it all been some kind of twisted dream? Did she see him, or had it been like her dream of the Stranger, nothing more than vapor, alcohol, and a long period of celibacy taking effect?

Looking slowly around the room, she saw nothing that would indicate that he had been there, nothing...except the black silk wrap that she still wore, the bow having loosened around her waist.

Moaning, she fell back into the cloud of pillows and felt her head begin to throb as everything that had gone on in this room just hours before slowly came back to her.

Well, to find the one bright light in this storm of chaos...well, she'd keep thinking about that one.

There were a million things she needed to do, and the first was to call one of her friends on the force, but Jagur, for whatever reason, had given her the no-go on that one. She wasn't as surprised as she thought she'd be when he rejected the help. He wasn't the same man she'd met on that distant summer night; he'd become guarded and secretive...and he didn't remember her in the slightest.

Forcing down the pain in her heart and the frog in her throat, she slid the silk wrap off her shoulders, leaving it pooled on the floor as she went into the bathroom to do her morning absolutions.

Spell or no spell, if the inclination to forget her and run hadn't been there, the spell wouldn't have had such a lasting effect on him. A spell can't make you do anything that you're dead set against...but damn near.

That's why those dark-robed sickos of the Inquisition used torture. Even an innocent man will plead guilty if you're ripping his intestines from his stomach with a hook. He knows he's going to be killed anyway, but at least he'll be buried in Holy ground...or so they told him.

Damn, dwelling on what had been done in the name of a Higher Power still to this day sickened her.

That was why the majority of Wiccans chose to

stay an unorganized religion, solitaires following whatever form or path they would. For positions of prestige or Power bring out the darkness in the human heart, and the last thing she needed was some stranger claiming to be the King or Queen of the Witches...bunch of hooey.

If she chose not to give them Power, then they had none over her. That was how all governments and organized religions worked. And giving someone Power, well, let's just say she liked to be her own driver on this road called Life.

Braiding her freshly washed hair, she pushed the darker-dwelling thoughts from her mind as she wrapped the braid around her head and secured it with a few pins.

Searching through her drawers, she grabbed a matching pair of gray cotton under-things, added a black pair of low-rise jeans and a ribbed, dark gray, form-hugging sweater, and she was ready for the day ahead.

Her wardrobe was as eclectic as she was, with clothes in the armoire ranging from silks and satins to leather. Cotton blouses and long, flowing skirts more likely to be seen at Woodstock than in this day and age. Every color, except maybe orange and yellow, was represented in her closet; from medieval to modern, she had a style for every mood and occasion.

Even if the last time she had gone out had been closer to two years than not.

Raina ran her finger over the transparent scarves with their coins jingling against each other, some silver, some gold, the beading as intricate as any she'd



seen.

Yes, there had been a time when she had danced for the fire, as it had for her. A time long past when the Loft had been filled with the eastern beat of drums and pipes, and zills...

She needed to dance again, if for no one but herself and the fire. It had taken her to a place beyond her worries back then, and if things kept up as they were, she'd soon need to do just that.

Running a hand through the silk of a few of her Italian Renaissance gowns, the nagging feeling that she was forgetting something kept knocking at the back of her skull.

Think, think, think...she felt like some honey-yellow bear sitting at his favorite thinking spot...what was it that she was forgetting?

Lightly tapping her head against the wall, she shook off the annoying sensation. If it were important, it'd come to her...how many times had she heard that one?

Quickly brushing her teeth and adding the faintest touch of rose water to her neck, she headed out the bedroom door and down the hall...oh for Lady's sake! Heading back to her room, she slipped on her black Van's and once again headed out the door.

Loren was just opening the front door as Raina reached it, Loren's face unusually bright and her demeanor ultra cheerful, so much so that it could only be designed.

They were in for another interesting day...

The morning went smoothly, at least more so than she had thought it would, with all their regulars and a

few new faces coming in and out as they left for work or school.

There had been whispers here and there about a body found in the Bay and how the paper said they couldn't identify much because the body didn't have a wallet...or a face.

But it, well, she, anyway, did have a tattoo. A band of what looked like ancient writing around her upper right arm.

Wonderful, now the TV evangelists were going to get all up in arms and say it was a satanic sacrifice, or she'd been running in the wrong crowd and got what she deserved.

Those crazy pagans and all that. Lady save her from the ignorant.

When only a few remained in the Library, she cleared off the tables in the front room, wiped them down, and started pushing the chairs back in place when she heard the cough.

Not a cough from a cold, but the discreet, 'I'm here and would like your attention' sort.

Lifting her gaze, she noted the silhouette standing just outside the doorway, the sunlight blazing off a car's windshield behind him, leaving him looking like some kind of wraith. But wraiths didn't have auras that screamed 'I have a badge, and I know how to use it.'

"If you be of good intent, enter freely, sir." The man paused for a moment, as if analyzing her words, before crossing over the threshold and glancing around the room as he closed the distance between them.

Tossing the damp rag across the room, over the counter, and into the sink with a resounding splash, she headed for the counter and her hot tea waiting behind it.

"How may I help you today, Detective?" Turning back to him, her mug of rosehip tea in hand, she felt a wave of surprise roll off of him, but none of it showed on his face.

And my, what a very handsome face you have, Detective...

Lady, when she cast a spell, she *really* cast a spell. More handsome men in her life than you could shake a stick at.

Tan wool blazer over a white cotton oxford with an obnoxious tie that reminded her of something that had exploded in the kitchen last year. Finished off with wrinkled khaki trousers, cardigan socks, and a pair of two-tone brown dress shoes.

The only thing that saved him from looking like he was a bit of a Joe Friday was the short on the sides, wavy on top, dark auburn hair, intelligent blue eyes streaked with gold and surrounded by thick dark lashes...and a face she could swear she'd seen on the cover of a novel somewhere.

"Yes, I'm Detective Warren of the SDPD. An officer from the station recommended that I come and see a Ms. Raina Lightfoot about some writing I need interpreted."

"I'm Raina Lightfoot." She didn't trust his intent, not from the moment he'd set foot in the Loft.

She didn't know if it was the condescending air, though that was certainly part of it, or the way he

kept looking around the room, toward the Library, as if he already knew what he was looking for and wouldn't even have identified himself if she hadn't called him on it.

"Do you have a badge, Detective? Or is this unofficial business?" Noting the gun holster, which was not empty, as he moved his coat aside to show the badge clipped to his belt, she knew she was being a bit edgy, but she couldn't help it.

"It's unofficial. My boss doesn't take it too well when one of his Detectives tells him that his source is that owner of that shop down the street that sells frog's legs and newt eyes."

"Then you're in the wrong store; the Bayou Bar-B-Q is over one block and two down." He tried not to smile—he really did—she could see his lips twitching at the corners before he finally let it bend his lips just the slightest at each end while he took a seat at the counter.

"Ms. Lightfoot..."

"Raina." Ms. Lightfoot, she could see spinsterhood looming with that one, but he continued on as if he hadn't heard her.

"I'm looking for some information on ancient writings. Maybe runes..."

"Like the ones on the arm of that body you found in the Bay?"

Nodding, he pulled out a piece of paper, and began to slowly unfold it. "Yeah, like those. How do those damn reporters get this information?"

"So I take it you were never here, and I never saw nothing?" Nodding, he gave her a quick grin for her

Good Fellows impersonation... her little brother Mickey was really good at Danny Devito's character; he must know that movie line for line.

Flattening out the paper, she took one look at the sketch of the tattoo and knew she had seen it somewhere before. She had actually helped the girl look up some of the symbols in one of her books.

She was there again, in that dark, wretched, rotting place...

*No!*

"No!" He eased back, removing his hand from her damp forehead with a jerk, not sure if she was protesting to his touch or whatever it was she had seen.

"Ma'am?"

Shaking like a three-day-old colt on its first legs, she grabbed the stool and sat down heavily, almost missing the seat. "Those markings on her arm are from the Elder Furthoc, the oldest form of Nordic runes. Each of those symbols is made up of between three and five other symbols, to form a word or name." Tracing her fingers in circular patterns over the runes, she quickly memorized what they said and looked up again.

"These runes are a spell of protection for those she loves and is loyal to. That she may have the strength of gift, will and ability to defend them against their enemies."

"And that's what it says exactly?" Pulling out a notepad and pen from the inside of the blazer, he held the pen poised over the paper, looking up when she didn't answer him.

Shrugging, something in her wouldn't let the spell that was woven into the tattoo cross her lips to be sent out into the world. For words have Power, and the spell that was held within these runes was a calling as well as a vow, and she had no intention of speaking either.

"No, it's a loose interpretation."

Sitting up straighter on his stool, he put down the pen and placed both of his hands in his lap.

She could feel it building, the frustration, fear, and even a bit of desperation. It was that last element that had her worried more than the first two. For a desperate man would do things that normally he wouldn't. Say things...

"If you'd like to make this inquiry official, Ms. Lightfoot, we can do it down at the Station."

He was serious; she could feel the cold steel of resolve to achieve his goal by any means whisper past her ear. "What's the charge?" Sipping her tea, she got up from the stool, made sure her still slightly wobbly legs would hold her, and poured some more.

"Withholding information pertinent to a murder investigation..."

"Please, Detective, you're here unofficially. You asked me if I could interpret something; I did. I've broken no law. Try again." Easing back into her stool, she blew on her tea before taking a sip, all the while keeping her gaze steady with his.

"I can take you in for suspicion..."

"For forty-eight hours, then you either have to let me go or charge me. I know the rules, I watch the news." Putting down her mug, she felt the tension

building inside him. She wasn't helping the situation. She was egging him on.

"Bless it, Detective, you are going about getting my help completely wrong. If you push, I push back twice as hard...it's simply my way..."

"Horses do that, too."

Stopping, his soft words brought a smile to her face and a snort of laughter before she could catch them. Placing her elbows on the counter, she chuckled once and leaned a few inches forward. "Yeah, they do." She'd said it with a smile in her voice, as softly as he had, but in the near empty room it seemed to echo off the walls.

"Ms. Lightfoot...Raina, I need your help to catch the bastards that did this. Anything you can give me to help me find them would be appreciated." Wavy lines of green and gold swirled in the blue of his eyes, the need in them calling to the Healer as well as the Guardian in her...but there was something else beyond those blue orbs, something dark and angry.

"You tell me why this is a personal vendetta for you, and I'll aid you as much as I'm able." For the second time in as many minutes, his shields flared instinctively against her own.

Searching her face in vain, he knew that he wasn't going to find some symbol or discreet sign that said 'This is one of the good guys', but he still tried. Who...no, what in the hell was the creature that sat before him, violet eyes calmly locked with his as if she had some cat-like ability to stare down any who came her way. How did she see what she did, how did she know what she seemed to know, and how much was

she holding back?

Raina knew he was arguing with himself, could almost hear the questions as they brushed against her mind. Now thank the gods, it wasn't one of her stronger gifts...but the more emotional a person was, the more they projected—thoughts as well as emotions. She had never wanted a stronger gift when it came to hearing the living; she already had enough issues with hearing the dead.

She saw the dark blue tones of resolve swirl through his extremely repressed aura and wondered if she would have been better off being bitchy and staying out of whatever was about to come her way.

Silently toasting the gods, she raised her mug to the ceiling and breathed a spell of protection into the tea before taking a second swallow.

"My sister disappeared when I was just a kid...my parents never talked about it. The police never found a body. One night, she was hitting me with a pillow, the next morning she was gone. Her nightshirt was ripped...shredded, without a drop of blood on it..."

"And you've been looking for her face on every body since...oh, gods, Detective, that's hard." Nodding, he ran a hand roughly through his slightly curly locks, making them more unruly than when he had first come in.

She knew she would help him as much as she was able. She'd said she would; it was part of the bargain. But...gods, she had the darkest feeling that she'd just stepped from sunlight to shadow, and she wasn't sure when she'd be seeing the dawn again.

*Lady love me, Lord protect me...*



Hopping off the stool, she sent the prayer out into the ether before slipping under the counter and heading for the Library.

"Come on, Detective. I think I can point you in the right direction without you having to tell your boss you got it on the word of a witch." She heard the stool screech as he shoved it back, rising to follow her. His shoes made a clicking sound on the hard wood floors as he bent through the beaded doorway and were blessedly muffled when he reached the rugs that covered the room's floor.

How was she going to help him without pointing a finger at the 'Fringe' communities? Gods, she loved that description, as if she was some decoration at the bottom of a Flapper's dress...

Nodding to the three people who had been sitting among the couches, she waved as they all got the sudden urge to go sit in the front room and munch on some sugar cookies with their coffee. They were two students and a professor from SDSU who habitually came here before their noon classes every day to 'soak up the vibe'. Non-magic terminology for dropping shields where you wouldn't get blasted by a million thoughts or feelings, but could take in the peace of the Loft.

Taking a few books from the shelves, she motioned her head to one of the longer couches for him to sit and brought the books to him, laying them on the coffee table by his knees as she sat in the chair across from him.

"I only ask that you listen with an open mind and do not judge us rashly."

He noted the 'us' she'd used, and had to catch the questions that started pounding in his head, so simply nodded his head. "Am I to assume what you are about to say is as off the record as me being here?"

Nodding, she reached for the fist book and was thumbing through the pages when she heard it, the thrumming of Power building up outside the shop, rubbing against her wards.

*Loki's blight! What in all that's blessed was that?*

"Excuse me, Detective, I'll be right back." Handing him the book, she didn't know what she had been expecting when she bent her head to go through the beaded doorway, but it sure as Light hadn't been a large raven; sitting so calmly on the rail outside the bay window, looking inside the store with a bird's usual intense curiosity.

A raven was setting off her wards?

Now admittedly a large raven, but a bird just the same...

It spotted her about the same time she saw it, and started hopping from foot to foot on the rail, cawing at her as she drew closer until she reached the front patio and lifted her arm bent at the elbow.

With a spring in its launch, huge wings with a span of at least four feet beat against the air. Its wings blasted the wind against her legs, then her torso and face as he crossed the few yards between them and landed solidly on her bare arm, the claws lightly gripping but leaving her flesh unbroken.

"Please tell me that's your pet..."

Shaking her head in reply, she slowly turned to the stunned Detective in the doorway, waiting for him to

put the gun he now held in both hands pointed toward the ground back in its holster.

"Then you were raised in the wild by a group of mutant crows?"

Shaking her head again, she slowly brought her free hand upward until she reached the raven's chest and lightly scratched the ruff of feathers there.

"Don't tell me this is an ex-boyfriend."

She really did want to laugh, but it might startle her already cautious companion, and she wanted to know why such a large and freaking powerful beastie had sought her out.

Letting her eyes slip to half-mast, she simply accepted the raven as part of her, recognizing that all things were connected by the spark of Creation, and listened.

It had been easier to do as a child. In fact, many of the gifts she had unknowingly as a child had gone dormant over the years, and she still wasn't all that positive why. They were still there, for they flared up on such occasion...maybe like a muscle being flexed that wasn't as strong as when used constantly but never truly gone.

She felt the raven recognize her as something of itself and could swear she heard the creature give a little chuckle as her gift did a little stumble once or twice before accepting him.

Opening her eyes, as that was what she had felt the Raven ask her to do, she looked down to see its claw now holding something she hadn't seen before. A small, rounded, river stone, black as mica and thrumming with Power.

Placing her hand beneath its raised claw, she waited for him to drop the stone, then placed it in her jeans pocket, and searched her mind for something to give it in return.

"Detective, will you please go and get a sugar cookie from the counter?" He gave both her and the bird an odd look, then did as she'd asked, slowing his steps a few feet from them and extending his arm to her with the cookie.

With a great caw, the raven effortlessly hopped from one arm to the other, scrutinized the thing held in the man's hand, and snapped it up between his beak.

Raina heard the detective's sharp intake of breath at the bird's sudden movement and slowly let it out again.

"May you never hunger." While the raven bobbed its great black head, Raina saw something flash behind those ebony eyes before it released its grip on the Detective's arm and took to the air.

Its wing tips brushed both of them across their bodies as it headed up and outward, skimming above the rooftops until completely out of sight.

"Does that happen a lot around here?"

Shrugging her shoulder, she looked up at the brilliance of a clear blue sky, wondering why it had happened now? "No, not all that much anymore. More often when I was younger...creatures aren't born with fear, it's taught to them by their parents and their experiences in life. Kind of sad when you think about it."

Easing past him, she headed back to the Library

after asking her three grinning patrons if they had enough coffee...not as if they wouldn't go and get it if they needed any more and leave the money on the counter...but it was just polite to ask.

When she did sit back down in her chair, he stayed standing...on the other side of the couch. Noting it, she chose to ignore him and reached for the open book on the table.

It was bound in leather, though originally its words had been carved into stones on the Thing, a boulder or some other natural edifice that was the place of Law for all Northmen. The Thing law was very specific in some things, not so in others, but left for interpretation and circumstances.

This was one of three copies made back in the late fourteen hundreds. But since the first had been but a copy of the Thing law and other facets of the Vikings writings, she really didn't see a difference between the two. There had been nothing lost in the translation, for it had not been interpreted. The letters were still in the ancient Futhorc, and still in Old Norwegian. Well, most of it.

She'd translated the book for the first time one summer when she was ten and had been laid low in bed for almost a month after exhausting herself, calling a storm to put out the fires that had been raging in the Cleveland National Forest, just miles from her home.

Gods, she never thought she'd hear the end of that one...a fire sign calling rain...well, at least the fires from the lightning went out just as quickly as the ones that had been started by an unattended campfire.

And then there were the mudslides that knocked down the power lines and the rattlesnakes that got caught in the flood and were swimming down river, scaring the hell out of the men trying to fix the power lines.

If calling rain was exhausting, controlling rain was nigh impossible.

Snorting at that certain memory-gods, she hadn't thought of that in years-she shook her head and kept carefully turning through the pages until she came to a part of the book that, as far as she could ascertain and was confirmed by her aunt, meant Emblah's Creed.

In Nordic belief, Emblah was the first woman created by Odin. The writings that some ancient ancestor of Raina's was lead to some huge slabs of amber, carved in a language that only those guarding it still comprehended. Handing down their knowledge, generation after generation, and only to women.

It was said that Emblah left behind three gods-Odin, Freya, and Loki's-most powerful spells and words of wisdom that were to guide their children on the correct path.

But Man strayed from the path, and the gods grew angry with their deviant children. The anger turned to rage; the rage, to condemnation for their creation. So the knowledge was taken away, left to be guarded by Odin's most loyal of all servants, the Valkyries.

Now, whether this was true, who was she to say for she hadn't been there. But the spells within this book were sacred and could not be given to any man,

let alone an unbeliever. It was from this very book that Amber had taken the Vow of the Swan-Maiden and weaved it with runes of Power and things sacred to her.

Knowing what was said in that band would not help Detective Warren, but in truth, she only knew one thing that would.

Raising her gaze from the book, she found the Detective strolling down one of her bookcases, running his fingers lightly against the bindings as if unconsciously searching for a book by touch. Who was she to tell him it was a book no less, that was calling him toward the corner of the room.

Looking down at the runes, she decided to do exactly as he asked and translate it, symbol for symbol.

Closing the book, she set it gently on the table, noting that he had not seemed to notice her rising and headed back to the front room to get a piece of paper and a pen.

When she came back, he was sitting in her favorite chair in the corner of the room; a book that her mother had written after her father had died resting in his lap.

And Lady love him, he was crying.

Not sobs, or shaking shoulders, but an errant tear here or there rolling down his face to be slowly wiped away with a handkerchief in his hand. And Lady, the emotions rolling off of him were not of the hurtful, pain-driven kind, but those more of the healing variety.

Catching her breath, she turned and left as silently

as she'd entered, asking the beads and bells in the doorway to stay silent for now and let none pass until he was done releasing whatever darkness he'd been fighting.

Locals as well as tourists, and Lady knew they had their fair share of them year round, came and went for another hour or so before the Detective came out of the Sanctuary, her mother's book under his arm.

"Detective, as you don't know the rules, I'll let you know the first one. None of my books go beyond that beaded doorway." Looking down at the book as if he hadn't even realized it was there; he stopped, turned around as if to take it back, then turned once again and sat down on the stool in front of her at the counter.

"Yes, well, I was wondering if you could make this one exception...for an Officer of the Law?" After she'd seen the look on his face when he realized he was carrying the book and the struggle she had just witnessed in putting it back, she knew that the book wanted to go with him. Sooner or later, it would find its way back to her.

Reaching under the counter, she took the piece of paper with the exact interpretation of the ruins on it, symbol for symbol if not word for word, and slid it across the counter.

Pointing to the first rune, she slid onto her stool and waited for him to stop staring at the book.

"Yes, Detective, you can borrow my mother's book. But please make sure to return it in the condition it left my Sanctuary in."

Nodding, he looked up to notice she was pointing



at something on a piece of paper and, with a start, realized what it was. "You finished so quickly? An exact translation?"

Shrugging her shoulders, she nodded. "I told you I'd help as best as I was able." The only problem was, she couldn't read them aloud because she knew what it meant, and that would be the same as casting. So all she could do was tell him in English what each ancient rune represented.

"I've written down beneath each rune what the symbol means. This first one is for all things sacred...a vow. The second is the ruin for protection, and so on."

"And that is all there is to this tattoo, Raina. Nothing more than ancient symbols that, when translated, mean absolutely nothing to anyone but the one who had them placed on her body."

"No one but Am...—Mit will ever know." Lady Bright, why don't you just tell him you know whom the tattoo belongs too?

*Because he never asked.*

"Am-Mit?" She could see suspicion begin to roll across his aura like a shadow, darkening the colors within. He had caught the slight pause.

"Am-Mit. Egyptian goddess of the Underworld...most of my patrons are quite well read on the pantheons of other religions..."

It was true, she hadn't spoken one false word, and yet...gods! *Just ask me, you dolt!*

Taking the paper with the translation, he folded it neatly and placed it within his inner pocket; doubting eyes never leaving her face.

"And might it be that you've seen this tattoo before, Ms. Lightfoot?"

"Aye, there's a possibility to that."

The Detective leaned forward, his face now covered in a mask of deadly calm. Raina knew he was going to ask her something she truly had no wish to answer, yet knew he had to hear if he had any chance to solve this case and find those that had killed Amber.

"And do you know who had this tattoo placed upon her arm?"

Lady love it, he'd said he'd keep an open mind..."Aye, there's a possibility to that as well." Something she didn't wish to see flared in his eyes for half a second and was hidden just as quickly. It had been something mixed with anger, frustration, denial, and disbelief, but all of it had been accusing.

"Then why didn't you tell me when I showed you this over an hour ago!"

Leaning forward as well, she tapped his forehead lightly with the eraser on the pencil. "Because you didn't ask."

It was the last thing he had been expecting to hear. And truth to tell, he didn't know what to say about the logic behind this infuriating witch's thinking. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes for a moment and ran through the conversation that they'd had in the beginning, and it hit him that no, he'd never asked her if she knew...well for the love of...

"Raina, as God is my witness, if you will help me out here, instead of trying to drive me mad, I will be in your debt."

Sitting back, she gave him a once over, from countertop to head, and knew that he was indeed a man of his word.

"You might not wish you'd made that vow, Detective, when some night in the future I come calling, needing a debt to be paid." She'd warned him. A vow given was a vow kept, and if there was indeed a time...

"I will not kill..."

"Nor would I ever ask you to! What kind of Healer do you think I am that I go about knocking off the citizens of this town in the dark of night?" She'd said the words more in jest than not, but the meaning was taken. She'd not ask him to kill anyone.

Now whatever else she might be asking, he'd deal with that when it came time.

Sitting back, she looked around the room, noticed that most were now heading for the other room and the books within it. Those that remained were outside or by the windows across the room.

"Her name was Amber, and no, I don't know her last name. She was one of my Gypsies...a kind of wanderer between the Loft and a club called Haven down the street. Where she lived in between, I don't know for sure. But I can do some asking and let you know if I find anything out."

She watched him freehand every word down on his note pad and then stop. When she didn't continue, he raised an eyebrow before quickly scanning over the notes he'd just written.

The bells went off above the door, noting another arrival, but it was the size of them that saved her from

answering any more questions. Gods love the lunch crew. The guys must have had an early game today, because they were a bit dirty and, as always, a lot loud; what did one expect from Rugby players?

"Raina luv, tell the bloke at the counter to stop hogging you all to himself, and get your pretty self out here for a hug!" Lady love him. Balder always did have the best timing.

"I've got to go, Detective. The lunch crew is coming in."

"And I've taken more than enough of your time today." Nodding, he picked up the book from the counter, and with a nod to the crowd of men behind him, he was off. Out the door, and out of sight.

But as long as he had that book, he'd be coming back. And she had a feeling it would be more on the sooner side than later.

Turning her gaze back to Balder and his crew, she noted his green and gold shirt had a new rip in the shoulder. And such freaking massive shoulders; probably twice as wide as she was. His shoulder-length platinum hair was streaked with a bit of dirt here and there, and a leaf to set off the ice blue in his eyes. Nose slightly crooked from too many breaks, one eye that looked like it was going to be a gorgeous shiner by evening, and a jaw she swore was made of tempered steel.

Balder looked like his name. Norwegian. Giant. The Shining God. A heart as big as the sky, and a love for the ladies twice as high.

"Balder, I swear if you bruise my ribs this time, I'll take my broom to your head!"

Holding her arms out to him, he brought her over the counter and into his chest for a hug as if she were nothing more substantial than a rag doll. He had to be almost seven feet tall if he was a foot, but when it came to women, he treated them like blown glass...except for her, lucky girl that she was.

Balder rubbed her back with one arm while he held her up with the other. Pushing away from his massive chest, the muscles gave nothing beneath her fingertips, and looked at his swollen eye.

"You'll need something for that, or the ladies won't think you so gorgeous tonight." Balder just grinned again. She knew it wouldn't slow him down. But then again, what did?

"Lass, you know that I'd leave them all if you'd let me in your bed..." The men around her laughed, good-natured. Well used to this display of devotion for one that none of them would ever have. Would ever try to have. She was their Raina. Their Swan-Maiden. And if they ever found the man that'd put the sadness in her eyes, they'd break him in half.

"Ho now! If that's the truth, then I'll be needing to get a bigger bed, for you'd be leaving no room for me once you were in it, you great oaf!" More laughter, and he put her down so she could get them some soup and sandwiches from the kitchen and another tray of sugar cookies, as they had finished the two there already.

When she came back out with the cookies and arnica gel for the bruises, Loren was back and behind the counter with a friend of hers from over at the Dubliner. They were quickly handing out drinks to

the men that had taken over the front room...and more people coming in the door.

She was going to need more help for the summer.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Aidan woke with the sunset. The sky's sweet song as it faded to deepest rubies and vibrant yellows slowly brought him from his trance to the knowledge that someone was sleeping against his side. With one leg curled around his own, and a pair of very female breasts pressed against his side in silken warmth.

He really needed to get to bed before sunrise. It had to be closer to ten this morning before they'd finished their plans for their search. Where to start had been a bit of a conflict, for half the Gathering was adamant that it was the Utameer, and the shifters had told the Lang to make them look innocent. The other half thought it had to be a Warlock of Power, for only they could truly kill one outside of the Tribes.

When one fought a creature of magic, one had to use magic. The principle was fairly simple. But tell a priest that when he lights a candle and prays that he is performing candle magic, they almost have an apoplectic attack in front of you at the very thought of it.

Well, if it lets them sleep at night...

Opening light sky-eyes, he turned his head on the

silk pillowcase, noting the way it felt against his cheek as he did so, much like his witch's fingers would feel against his skin. Much like the skin of her stomach would feel against his cheek...

Date-colored eyes crinkled at the corners in a smile as she rose next to him and quickly brushed her satin lips against his cheek before she rolled out of bed, naked as the day he'd met her. Layla was beautiful. Not the reed thin, ribs popping out everywhere, looking like an Ethiopian on purpose beauty that those who lived in southern California defined the word as. But full breasts, lush, womanly curves toned with muscle from years of martial arts, yet retaining a definite female grace of form. The type of figure you would know instinctively is female if you brushed against her in the dark.

And she usually didn't sleep next to him nude...

"Layla love, is there something I need to apologize for?" He remembered going to sleep, Layla still with Evan... "I'm going to kill him!"

Widening her eyes, as if to say 'oh, really?' she walked back over to him and nuzzled his neck with her nose, and when she pulled away, there was laughter in her eyes. He could count on both hands how many times he had seen such a thing.

"He had no right."

She leaned away from him and nodded toward the bathroom where, now that she brought it to his attention, he could hear water running in the bath.

"You were curled up beside me while you waited for the bath to fill?" At her nod, the anger that had been rising, throbbing through his aura, deflated into



a bit of foolishness and another question.

Why did it bother him if she slept with Evan?

She was free to do as she willed, not some serf bound to him. He wasn't what one would call possessive, yet it seemed that where she was concerned...it was definitely what one would call complicated.

Pulling her onto the bed against his side, the silk sheet the only barrier between them, he simply held her, listening to her heartbeat, and knew that nothing had changed.

She was still his Layla...His Layla...and he didn't want to lose the bond that they had. It was the bond between them that he was so protective of. He loved her, aye, for she had been his steady companion and confidant for centuries. But what he felt for his witch and what he felt for his desert rose were like fire and water.

Giving her one last squeeze, he released her and stared up at the gold velvet canopy as she went into the bathroom. His thoughts now set on tonight, and wondering if he would find his witch in the morning...lying so beside him.

\* \* \* \*

It was Friday night, and the Loft was packed to the rafters with more vibrant auras than Raina could ever remember being there before...and all of them knew Loren.

Finishing off the icing on the kestrel and half-moon-shaped sugar cookies, she placed them on the

platter at the counter for those who wished to have one while filling a house coffee for one of her regulars.

Putting it up on the counter, she beckoned him over from his table with a wave of her hand and once again watched as another patron with an aura that matched the freaking halogen beams on her SUV walk through her wards and head for the counter.

"Loren, I know the question may sound a bit odd, but...what in all that's Sacred is going on tonight?" Raina watched Loren pause for a moment before hugging the newest firefly over the counter and giving him a cookie.

"Jagur's band is playing at the Dubliner tonight, so they all decided to meet here before they headed over." Raina sensed the uneasiness in her friend as she spoke the words and knew the last part of them to be not completely true.

Raina felt Mickey come in the door with his ladylove Catrina before she saw them through the crowd. Blond hair to black, light eyes to dark, tanned skin to pale. They couldn't be more opposite in looks, but more alike in soul.

No matter what, whenever he came in, he brought a smile to her face. He was the closest thing she had to a little brother, and she adored him. She even liked the quiet creature that had claimed his heart's devotion.

Ducking under the counter, Mickey's face lit up as he smiled at her, grabbing her around the waist for a hug.

"Hey, Rain, you look a might busy tonight."

"As usual, you are the master of perception, doll. It's all the halogens that have me puzzled."

Mickey paused for a moment to look around the room.

Raina noted him squint as he glanced across the crowd in mock pain before grabbing a deep blue apron with the words Prince Charming stitched across it on silver letters from a hook behind her and putting it on.

"Hmmmmm, well...do you need any help?" Oh, he knew something that she didn't, and he'd avoided the issue perfectly. For he knew that indeed she did need help, and that was the price she'd pay for not bringing up the unusual amount of gifted folk in the Loft.

Had to love the silent communication between bond-siblings...

"Raina, can I help?" The whisper-soft words came from Catrina. Her slight, elfish frame, matching the size of her voice, but not her heart...or from what Mickey had said, her temper.

"An extra pair of hands is always welcome..." Whatever Raina was going to say died on her lips as her Stranger stood on the other side of the counter, hands offered out to her.

"So where do I start?"

Raina felt her eyes start to tear as the already blinding auras in the room went up a notch all at once, as if they hadn't noted his presence until he had spoken. Sighing in exasperation, she was tired of not knowing what was going on and getting really freaking fed up with it. Grabbing the stool by the

register, she stood up on it and stared out into the room until the rumble of voices slowly faded into what felt like a louder void of sound.

"Okay, you know I adore all my patrons, but if you can't dim those lovely auras, then you need to see someone who can tell you how, because you all have me going about blind over here." Instantly, what had once been blinding was almost non-existent. Every single one of the gifted in that room knew how to use their shields and knew their magic better. Not a single halogen was left glowing. There was nothing but a room full of low-burning embers waiting to blaze up at the first sign of trouble.

What in all that was Sacred were these people trying to ward with auras as bright as the freaking sun? A shadow-blessed vampire?

Nodding her head to them in thanks, she got off the stool, placed it back in front of the register, and turned back toward the stranger...who was now surrounded on three sides by the help.

"Loren...Mickey...Catrina." Their names came out in short, irritated barks, as they were given her best 'totally fed up and about to Cast' look as she ducked under the counter and stared them all down.

"I do not know what is going on here, and to tell the truth, I'm getting a bit pissy about it." Noting that they were all slowly taking a step at a time back from her Stranger, she eased between them and placed her back to his front so that she could see all three of them as she spoke.

"But I would be willing to forget this secretive bullshit, if you would be so kind as to watch the front

while I speak with my *guest* in the back.” They didn’t move. As a matter of fact, no one in the entire room moved. As if holding their collective breaths, waiting for some unseen cue to take their action.

Loren’s head moved only the slightest of millimeters in a nod, her eyes drilling holes in the man behind her, the warning clear as a scrying glass in her sparkling, ocean eyes.

And with that nod, voices once again drowned out the noise of the coffee brewing in the kitchen, her breathing no longer sounding quite so loud in her ears.

“Thank you.” Nodding to the other two, she looked over her shoulder, nodded her head toward the Library’s beaded doorway and headed out of the room without looking to see if he followed. For she knew he did, like a fire blazing against her back. The heat sank into her bones as she walked through the Library, down the darkened hall, through the kitchen’s open door, and into the peace and tranquility of the stone-walled patio.

Motioning toward a bench with a wave of her hand, she began to pace up and down the multi-colored quartz slabs that had been placed in a pattern of a woman, arms raised above her head, the full moon cupped within her palms.

Turning, she noted that he was standing by the doorway still...watching her as she paced. His long blond hair framed a slightly amused expression as he tracked her movement. The fact that it was more than likely at her expense didn’t help any.

“Who in Hern’s name are you that you set my

friends off like some child molester in a State Prison?" His mouth quirked upward even more at her words, the glittering in his eyes shouting out his laughter, more so than any megaphone could do.

\* \* \* \*

Feeling her rising confusion that was quickly turning to a searing anger rolling against his shields, he held up one hand pleadingly, asking her to wait but a moment while he gathered himself.

Gods, she was absolutely marvelous when she was frustrated! Her graceful walk becoming a jerk of hips that was fascinating to watch. Her chest heaving as she took deep, calming breaths. And the pure energy that licked against his shields like a tightly controlled blaze could feed him for days on its own.

"My name is Aidan. As to your friends not liking me. Well, let's just say it's an old grudge." He spoke the truth. It rang in her ears with a pure tenor vibration that no lie could reproduce; yet it was deeper in resonance. He hadn't spoken false, yet he'd left a large portion of what she wished to hear unsaid.

"And the reason we met yesterday at the Market, it was because of the spell I cast, wasn't it?"

Shrugging a shoulder with a nonchalance that he never truly felt around this woman, he walked over to the bench by the tinkling fountain and sat down, waiting for her to do so as well.

\* \* \* \*

For the first time that night, Raina noted what he was wearing. Dull, soft looking black leather pants, with a black ribbed, mock turtleneck, and a black leather coat that fell to about mid-thigh. Doc Martins in the same color scheme finished the outfit, making him look like some star from a Clinton Tarantino flick where you're never sure if they're bad good-guys or good bad-guys.

And his hair fell in soft, wheat-colored waves around a face that some people would give their souls for.

She'd called this?

There was no other explanation for him being there, unless he was as intrigued by her as she was by him.

Feeling a small 'tap' of energy against her forehead to get her attention, Raina watched as his eyes moved from her to the bench beside him to her again and finally got the message. Catching the urge to swipe at some non-existent wrinkle on her black jeans, she willfully kept her pace unhurried as she crossed the courtyard and sat down. It was a loveseat made for two to sit closely together in front of the fountain. And do what people in love did in front of fountains. So only a few inches separated their legs as she pressed her back against the arm of the bench. Noting his leather-covered arm hanging over the back of the bench and the hand that was just too close to her neck to put her at ease.

Turning slightly toward him, she raised one perfectly arched eyebrow at him and put on her most interested look.

"You're patronizing me," he said with an amused tone.

Shrugging a shoulder as she nodded, she knew she had been, but patience had never been one of her stronger virtues.

Leaning against the back of the bench, he made a slow study of her from her Vans to her form-fitting, dark gray sweater and finally stopped when he'd traced the pattern in the braid of her hair.

"Aidan, being that you don't know me all that well, let me tell you that I do not have time for games right now. If you didn't happen to note, the Loft is full of people..."

"Witches today have no time for the thrill of the chase or simply enjoying the moment. But if you wish to speed things along, then by all means..."

She hadn't trusted the look that she saw forming in his darkening eyes, but she definitely didn't trust the hand that slid around the back of her neck as he leaned into her, his mouth a mere inch from hers from one breath to another.

"Spells, you move fast." Raina felt Aidan smile as he rubbed the tip of his nose against her cheek.

"I can move even faster." He hadn't understood what she'd meant. She had been talking about his speed, and he had taken it in an entirely different manner.

Dodging a pair of descending lips, she felt them brush against her earlobe, sending a shiver running down her neck to her fingertips.

"I meant your speed, not your seduction, Mr. Vain." Putting her hands between them, she exerted



the slightest pressure and felt him move back with it. His eyes filled with a gleeful laughter, making her immediately hit on the notion that he had been toying with her.

"You knew what I meant."

Nodding, he ran a hand through his hair and grinned boyishly at her as he turned on the charm. "Mmm-hmmm, I did. But you have to admit, lovely, you set yourself up for it."

Knowing she'd been suckered, she threw back her head and let out a short laugh. At herself, at him, at the world...it didn't matter. "I have had the worst day in a very long time." Unaware of her actions, she began petting the hand that had returned to the back of the bench, her fingers drifting lightly over the hairs on the back of his knuckles as she felt her body relax a bit and looked up at the twilight skies.

"What happened?" Glancing at him to make sure he was really interested and not patronizing her like she had earlier, she ran a hand over her forehead and let out a long sigh.

"Well...let's just say that a Detective will probably be stopping by Haven tonight looking to ask some questions about one of our mutual patrons." Gods, it had to be the emotional exhaustion hitting her, because she couldn't remember being this content to just sit in the dark with a man, especially this totally unsuitable man, and vent.

"Really?" She heard the question, and the nonchalance behind it wasn't faked. Either this man had police coming by his club all the time asking questions, or he had a get out a jail free card in his

wallet.

"Yeah, he came into the Loft this morning, asking if I could translate a tattoo in ancient Furthoc...and it kind of went downhill from there." Rubbing the space between her eyes, she glanced up at the sky that was slowly dissolving into a deep, star-specked purple, and knew she had to warn him.

"I don't know if you knew her, just because she practically lived at Haven...but he'll be coming to ask about Amber..." Power flared against her shields, and she saw a picture of Amber dancing beneath a ceiling of black silk, dressed in Victorian lace and black satin...auburn hair turning to flame beneath the dance floor's lights. The people around her moving in one sensual mind to the beat of an unseen drummer.

Taking in a deep breath, she released it and, with it, the vision. Gods, but she would hold on to that one, to help erase the last vestiges of the vision she'd last seen her in.

"So I take that for a yes." Power. Pure, honey-warm and splinter-sharp energy pulsed against her shields. When sitting this close, it just couldn't be helped...but it was the ice that she saw in his eyes that worried her. Death waited in those eyes.

As the Healer in her reached forward, the Witch drew back. She didn't want to know what he had done to earn those sapphire pools of silence. She just did *not* want to know.

But Blessed if she hadn't taken vows.

"I hope the fate I see in your eyes isn't intended for me, Aidan, or this is going to be one short flirtation."

\* \* \* \*

Aidan heard the words, even if they didn't all quite connect. The red haze that was searing through his blood was blocking out everything else around him. Taking a deep breath, he held it in, counting the beats of his heart as it slowed, the pressure in his head becoming a burning pain before he slowly grounded and released.

Amber. One of the Loyal. One that had been of the Utameer but had somehow found joy with the Lang.

Amber...with the flame-kissed hair, and warrior's heart. Hands that eased shoulders and lifted spirits.

She had been staying in the rooms above the club where the Loyal often did. Coming and going as she pleased, but never for more than a day or so. Never for a Sabbat.

She hadn't been there last night or the night before. If he thought back long enough, he could swear to at least five days that she had been gone. But she hadn't been herself the past few weeks, wandering off more and more to be with herself or running with her pack beneath the pale sliver of moon. She had been one of the few that could walk in both worlds unmolested. There had just been something about her...

She had said that she'd go to the ocean and listen for the Unicorns in the waves or up into the mountains to search for arrowheads. She'd been growing restless as Beltane had approached, and he had...what...assumed she had gone off again? Thought that he would know if anything happened to her?

Raina knew he was a million miles away. Could see the distance in his eyes and feel the memories slide against her mind like spider web in a dark room before floating away.

Easing up, she walked into the kitchen and came back with two mugs of rosehip tea, quietly blessing them as she sat down again and eased her back against the bench.

"Aidan, she's not hurting anymore. Not like..."

Aidan came back to his surroundings as she softly whispered the blessing upon the mugs, a slow smile forming on his lips for something that was done thoughtlessly, yet held such strength. But her words bent his lips down at the corners, had him leaning slightly forward as he took the mug she offered and staying there.

His witch knew something more. And he needed to know...everything.

Probing her shields, she felt what he was requesting. A trip into her mind, into what she had seen and wished to a thousand gods she hadn't. But if she accepted, he would have access to so much more...

*You would not call one without honor...*

But she couldn't.

He felt her resistance and knew he could press her no further without inciting the wrath of the shifters in the other room...but he wouldn't have, even without them. There was something about her that he did not wish to break. Some unseen belief in the goodness of all creatures...light or dark.

So she did the next best thing. She just started

talking at the beginning with Loren and what she had seen, leaving out Jagur from the tale, and finished with Aidan sitting before her looking as out of place as a Bentley next to a farm house.

Quirking his lips at her last words, he finished his now cool tea and knew he had to call the Lang together tonight. But damned if he wanted to leave her company so soon...

"I have to go...but I'd like to see you tonight, Raina, when some things I have to attend to have been finished. We could sit on the cool tiles of your rooftop and watch the stars fade with the dawn." She had done that so many times, awaiting the rising of the sun with sage and sea salt to bless the coming day and all those the rays touched until it set again that evening...

But hadn't she decided that he was not for her?

However, the spell had called him, which meant that if she would ever know the true reason behind this insane attraction was to see if he slowly faded from her life, or if it was a more lasting emotion that brought him to her.

Leaning forward, she took his now empty mug from his hand and stood. If it was a mistake she was making, then it wouldn't be the first, or the last.

But she might as well enjoy the fall...

"I'll be out here tonight, after the Loft is closed down, to put my feet up and go over some bills. If you'd like to stop by...then I don't see the harm in that." Her chin rose a notch as he stood to keep eye contact. He topped her by a good six inches, and she was nowhere near short.

Taking the step between them, noting that she held a mug in each hand and could bash them over his head if she wished it, he touched her chin with his thumb as his lips brushed hers, soft as a moth's wing, flowing across her lips, reminding him of warm satin and heated, sultry Louisiana nights.

Tongues glanced against each other's fleetingly, before returning for another pass. Teeth nipped full lips softly, drawing a resigned sigh from them both as they parted.

What in the world did he see that made his eyes go from sky light to gem dark when he looked at her?

Tilting her head back, she stepped away.

"Miss me?" The easy tease was back. Whatever had drifted through his eyes lifted with the kiss.

"Lady save me..." He laughed as she rolled her eyes, and then he was gone, out the back gate and into the shadows of the alley.

## CHAPTER NINE

Aidan made his way back through the shadows to Haven, every sense alert to sounds beyond human hearing. The flutter of a moth's wing, the sweeping of gravel across the street by an errant breeze, the crying in some lonely creature's heart.

The last had more to do with the gift of Empathy than being Lang. Most of them blocked out the little noises before it drove them to the brink of immortal madness. But after all this time, he had found music in the chaos of sound around him. But tonight, there was such sadness, wailing dark and desolate nipping at the back of his mind.

Who was it, in the shadows that accepted him as kin, who felt such jagged, inconsolable pain? And why was he hearing them among a city that was so filled with aching hearts and bleeding souls?

Shaking his head, he merged with the shadows, easing deeper into the night as he moved swiftly passed a group of teenagers on the street, their hair dyed in colors only a chemical could produce, all but one. With a glorious mane of pale auburn hair, her porcelain skin flawlessly surrounding a pair of wide

green eyes...and her heart was crying.

Not so that any of the little Goths surrounding her would notice, too involved on their latest experiment with chemicals that would enlighten their bored minds.

And she was Langlowlawk...as pure a being of Fire and Air as he had ever felt. Pounding against his shields with the Power that slept just beneath the surface, waiting to be Awakened with a kiss.

Slowing, melding with the shadows that draped against the tall brick buildings of the Gaslamp, he watched them, their voices murmuring to one another of what new sensation they were feeling...but she was clean. She stood among them, one of them, yet apart.

The gifted did one of two things from the very beginning. They knew that drugs would only enhance what they could feel beyond their control, or they learned the hard way. A lot of teenagers seemed to be doing it the hard way lately.

Standing there, beyond their notice but only a few yards away, he watched as she lifted her head, like a wild creature scenting the breeze, and turned her head toward him.

Aye, truly gifted...

Her eyes searched the shadows, knowing something was there, but unable to see it with her kelp green eyes running back and forth along one spot on the wall.

"Hey, Rhia, what ya lookin' at?"

Rhia...short for their goddess Rhiannon? Could this little sleeper be the reincarnation of an Elder?



Moving deeper into the shadows, he placed the feeling of her Power firmly in his mind, so that he would be able to find her again while in trance and send another to watch over her. With his kind being hunted, she was safer now until they had found them. Until he had made it safe to Awaken her from her mortal sleep.

“No, Jade, it’s nothing.” Picturing her in his mind, he wasn’t surprised as another face joined the first. Raina was aware of her Powers, but not all of them.

Not yet, anyway...

Sweeping through the shadows, moving like a cold wind against the people in the street, he sidled up to a side door into Haven, through the pitch hallways and into the back rooms above the dance floor, silent until he reached his rooms.

Eyes drifting over the black silk and leather gothic motif that dominated the room, he walked to the far end and pulled off the black silk that was hanging over a standing mirror with silver dragon feet.

A scrying mirror gifted to him by Clio, he had never seen his reflection in its surface until this crazy night. And the creature that looked back at him with the wary eyes wasn’t the leader of the Dagda’s Children, the Gathering, but some unsure stranger that didn’t know what the gods willed him to be.

*When you don’t know where you’re going, fall back on where you’ve been...*

The words rolled through his mind with the faint smell of heather and moonflower, his mother’s voice from that distant place in the past bringing a smile to his lips.

Even if she'd been reborn a hundred times since he'd last seen her, the words she'd told him before he left still rang with a certainty that he was far from feeling...

*Who are you?*

*I am Aidan, son of Brighid, daughter of the Dagda.*

*Where do you come from?*

*I come from the Tuatha De Danann, dwellers of Tara...*

Raising his eyes from the mirror's reflection, he closed them and felt her beside him as if he had never left her that misty night.

"Maybe you truly are a goddess now..."

"The mirror's old, but I don't think it's that old, Aidan." The amusement-laced voice could only belong to one person.

"Clio. Come to help me plan the bloodshed? Or are you just lurking in the shadows for your own private amusements?"

Walking up to his side, she was wearing little more red silk than she had black leather the night before, but she was a beauty all the same. "Now, luv, you know I prefer to *amuse* myself when other people are involved." Running a hand through his hair, she took in the scent of his witch and smiled. "No, this involves the Gathering. I took roll as you asked, and it seems that three of the Loyal and two of the Lang have gone missing. All of the Loyal were practitioners and of the pack...well were, before they came to us."

Taking her hand, he slowly brought it to his lips, brushing them across her knuckles as he held her gaze. "Then we need to find them. Amber is lost to us, hers was the body found this morning in the

Bay..." He felt it flare over him. The anger, and the pain.

Amber had been a close friend to her, smiling when Clio would swear about her pack in her infinitely bright way. Lover to Liam, Clio's bond-brother...she had made them laugh with her stories of her tribe and maybe begin to wonder at the anger between their kind.

"It will do us little good to find bodies. We must find the Loki-blessed warlock that would dare to do such a thing and make them beg for a quick death..."

Thanatos must have eyes like that, the dead calm and certainty that swirled in Clio's eyes reminding Aidan of that long-ago night when he had met Death for the first time. "Aye, Clio, they will fall...be it one, or one thousand. You have my word." And a word given, was a word kept.

His vow seemed to appease her for the moment, for her carefree and benevolent mask once again slipped over her face like a familiar shadow, and she filled the room with an overly dramatic sigh.

"Well then. The Loyal wait for us below. The Council has given their blessing for the hunt." Gliding past him toward the door, hips swaying, long legs crossing with cat-like steps...he felt her Power shiver about the room seconds before she stopped. Turning back to him, the rage was once again simmering in her eyes, and he knew that she was letting him see a side of her she had not let many others witness.

"We may not be able to kill those involved. But we can hold them down while I guide some of my more talented lovelies in one of the Egyptians more

interesting pastimes...”

Shaking his head, he carefully walked over to her, keeping his movements slow and his breathing steady so as not to startle whatever it was that was glaring out at him from those beautiful, ice-blue eyes. Reaching her side, he brushed the side of her cheek with the back of his hand and eased her into his embrace.

“But Clio, how would the coroner explain to the police why their brains had been pulled out through their noses?”

\* \* \* \*

Raina felt it. The shift in the wind from north to south. Bringing with it the warm winds from Chili and the Panama Canal, the scent of lush vegetation, machetes, and...death.

The rotting kind that she had sensed when she had seen Amber, what felt like an eternity ago but had been less than a single moon’s passing in the sky.

It was Friday night, a little past midnight, and the Loft was easing the last of the stragglers up from their seats and out the door. Their minds full of the hot chips and warm Guinness that would be waiting for them over at the Dubliner right about now.

Jagur’s band, Woodruff, had come and gone without Jagur. But Balder, the band’s groupies, and the rugby players’ female followers—who preferred to be called loyal fans—had also dropped by...so the front room was packed for a good hour while people paired off for the night, some going back to the

Dubliner for one last hurrah while others headed to one remodeled warehouse loft or penthouse suite to spend some alone time with their companion for the remainder of the night.

One or two of the new guys on the team had approached her, sitting on the counter with Balder standing beside her. Balder's arm carelessly wrapped around her waist while his other arm was wrapped around a cute brunette that couldn't have been much taller than his navel...

But Balder had given them The Look, and they had found their companions elsewhere...all the while with Raina trying not to silently laugh herself off her precarious perch on the counter.

Balder and his miniscule brunette had been the last of the group to leave. He'd taken a good look around the room, made certain anyone there knew not to bother Raina, and smacked his lips loudly against her cheek before carrying the giggling pixie of a female out of the Loft over his shoulder.

Well, the man had style. What kind, she wasn't sure, but it seemed to work with the ladies.

Shutting the front door, she replaced the wards, then headed into the Library to finish putting away any of the books left on the tables and bringing in the last of the coffee mugs.

The jingling of the door had her raising her head in surprise, before her feet were carrying her to the beaded doorway, scanning the front room for whoever had set the bells off without passing through her wards.

The lights were now out, leaving her silhouetted

from the lamps in the Library and feeling extremely exposed.

Running her hand over a wall sensor, the light eased into darkness right before she felt something pass by the counter, stirring the air and sending it in waves across the floor to brush against her feet.

"Lady love me..." A faint, terrified whimper echoing across the room from somewhere behind the counter eased the words back into her throat, and called to the Healer to help whatever lurked in the shadows.

Letting her eyes adjust to the faint light coming from across the street, her pupils slowly brought everything into a black and white, crystalline focus.

What kind of creature can pass through wards, but not doors...undetected?

Power surged against her wards from the street, vibrating along their surface, searching for a weakness in the links. But she had been putting up wards for years. She knew how to make them. Whatever was trying to force its way in now didn't know her, or it wouldn't have bothered with a magical offensive.

Searching the street outside the window, she felt her eyes strain as she searched the shadows, yet found nothing. The only other place the Practitioner could be was...the roof across the street.

Throwing out her senses, she felt them pass through the shields and plow into whatever it was bombarding her wards with a screaming kind of heat that left her slightly deaf and her mind numb until she'd pushed past it.

Sensing what she'd done, the attack on her shields stopped. Only to have the eerie silence broken by something scrambling over the stone wall in the back patio, and Raina recalling with a sickening in her stomach that she had left the kitchen door open.

"Shit." Raina turned to face the inky blackness of the hallway and whatever was waiting for her in it, thinking now was definitely not the time to wish she'd taken up one of those big, lovely gentlemen on their earlier offer.

Pissed at the intrusion and furious that whoever it was had managed to scare her, she placed the book she had been holding in the shelf by her head and silently pressed against a panel a shelf higher. Wrapping her fingers around the handle of the athame that was kept behind it for exactly this occasion.

The blade was nine inches of pure silver. The handle was from a sacred rowan tree and carved with runes of protection and bright blessings to the wielder. The wood was smooth and warm in her palm, as if someone had been holding it before her, and the blade was well balanced, fitting easily in her hand.

*...Lord protect me, your child, in this, my time of need...*

She whispered to the gods, asking for their blessing as she called upon the Guardian within her soul for the strength to take a life if that was the will of Fate.

All of this happened within a few seconds, yet it felt like hours before she eased away from the wall and silently began to cross the pitch room and into

the narrow hallway toward the kitchen. Keeping her back just a hairsbreadth from the wall so as not to have her clothes slide against it, she carefully placed one foot in front of the other, finding the well-worn wooden grooves by memory and avoiding those that creaked with any amount of weight.

The blade felt hot in her hand as she held it pointing out in front of her chest, her entire body slipping into some unconscious groove as it collapsed against itself, becoming one with the wall.

Boards creaked directly across from her—it could be no more than a foot away from her—yet something passed by her and continued to move on toward the Library.

*My ass...*

*"Be you of good intent..."*

It lurched towards her, lightning fast, slamming her against the wall and impaling itself on her blade. Raina felt the weight of it jerk in surprise, before it let out an unearthly scream of pain and lunged away from her, running out the way it had entered. Once again, passing through her wards without a trace of it ever existing.

"What in all that's blessed is going on?" Keeping a grip on the now slightly slippery handle, she didn't even want to turn on the lights and see her hands. From the wet, sticky feeling against the entire front of her torso and part of her jeans, she was a mess.

Easing away from the wall, she padded down the hallway, locked the kitchen door, activated her casting wards, and headed back into the Library. As she passed through the beaded doorway, she asked



for their silence.

Whatever had been behind the counter in the front room wasn't there now...because it was trying to turn itself into the smallest living ball in existence in the corner underneath a table.

Easing into a crouch a good couple yards away from the whimpering mass of absolutely petrified... whatever it was...she could swear she smelled dirty fur, like a junkyard dog, and...something. It drifted in the back of her memory like some elusive test answer until finally she simply shrugged and stored it away to pick at later.

"Blessed be, little one. You're safe now." In the black and white of almost no light, she could make out a mass of unkempt, ratty hair and arms that were covered in so much dirt that she wasn't sure about the nationality.

The whimpering stopped in stages until finally it ceased all together, and the shaking ball of dirt lifted its beleaguered head to give her the most soulful, puppy dog dark eyes she'd seen since Bambi.

"Well now, that's better, then. Let's get some light and see what I've got here." Standing slowly, she eased away from it-she still couldn't tell its sex—and took a step toward the light switches near the counter.

"No! No lights!" The absolute panic, frantic with its desire to stay in the dark rocked against her senses, spinning her on her heels and back to her former position, crouched in front of her unusual guest.

"Most people prefer there to be some light, even if just a single candle, little one. Why is it that you don't want any?" The whimpering had turned to a soft,

desolate weeping; its narrow shoulders shaking with each labored breath.

"Well then, I guess I can find my way about just fine in the dark, but I do need to get cleaned up a bit..." Bells clanging wildly as they were jerked against the front door had her jumping to her feet as the usually pleasant sound echoed through her mind.

Well, if it was her former intruder, it was getting bolder.

"Raina! Bright Lady, let her be..."

"I'm over here, Jagur. I'm alright." Bolting from the door, he was beside her in less than a heartbeat, his hands running over her face and working their way down her body, stopping when they reached the sticky, cooling wetness of her shirt.

She didn't need her gifts to know what was running through his mind.

"No worries, it's not mine."

A pent up breath rushed through his flared nostrils before he noted the athame in her right hand, half-hidden behind her leg.

Even in the dark, she could see his ebony eyebrows rise and the shields she had yet to get used to him using expand throughout the room, searching for a threat.

Before she could tell him that the danger had passed, he was on his knees, crawling toward the huddled mass beneath the table. A low rumbling growl rolled in his throat as she felt his senses focus on this one being and surround her...yes; it was her...with his Power.

The crying stopped, just before she lifted her head

again, his name an unbelieving prayer on her lips.

"Jagur?"

"Aye, Sheila, me and no other." Easing up to her side, his long legs out straight beneath the table as his head kinked to one side to get this close to her within the confines of her dark sanctuary, he waited for her to touch him first.

Sheila? Searching her memory, she couldn't recall a Sheila that would fit this creature's description. But, then again, it meant female to the Aussies, so maybe it was a pet name.

Raina watched as he stretched out beside her guest for a moment before going to the sink behind the counter and peeling off the sticky sweater. Her bra had a splatter here or there; most of the blood had been from the bottom of her ribcage down. Her jeans were another matter entirely.

Sighing, she worked them over hips and thighs, letting them pool at her feet. Toeing out of her Vans, she picked up her clothing and placed them in the sink and turned on the cold water...something about cold not setting the stain...

"Raina?" Jagur's low voice whispered across the room, easing around her heart for just the merest second, before she batted it away and headed over to his prone form.

"Yes?"

Raina saw the dawning memory in his eyes, but before she could say anything, it had fled, only to have the distant stranger return.

\* \* \* \*

Jagur hadn't been sure at first what had him turning around in mid-stride, a few miles from the Dubliner. He had decided to go for a walk around the Bay, wishing they'd turn some of the street lamps off so he could get a better look at the stars, when he knew he had to come back here...that it had to be Now. He'd raced passed groups of drunken college students and couples going for a midnight stroll, blowing by them like a shadowy breeze.

As he'd neared the Loft, he'd sensed the Power that was hammering against her wards, and when it suddenly dispersed, desperation began to claw at his throat.

What had gone on from then until he'd gotten to her side and felt the cool stickiness on her shirt reeking of blood and corruption, he couldn't say. He'd been too focused on getting to her before she was taken to a place that he could not bring her back from. Amber's face drifting across his mind like some twisted hologram of what might be when he got there had urged him to greater speeds.

But finding Her here, filthy and emaciated, had never crossed his mind, or his senses. And when he curled up beside her, he knew why he hadn't sensed her until he had been nearly on top of her.

She simply wasn't there.

Whatever light had once shone so brightly, that thing which had been intrinsically hers...was gone.

All that remained was this confused shell of a creature that refused to touch him, closing herself off from even the most basic of comforts among their

kind.

Jagur saw the bare legs, but nothing connected until he slid out from beneath the table with the agility of an A-1 contortionist. What little detail the darkness hid from his sight, his memory of dreams long past provided.

"I can't touch her, but you, being a Healer, can. I need you to reach whatever is left of her, and help me get her somewhere safe where I can take care of her." Looking around the dark front room of the Kestrel's Loft, he saw her raise a sable eyebrow, as if to say, 'and how much safer would you like than a witch's place of Power?'

"You go and make sure the way is clear to the rooftop patio, and I'll take it from there." Raina suggested.

Nodding, he stood and headed into the blackness of the Library while she bent down on one knee and fell into a Healer's trance.

\* \* \* \*

*Who are you?* The soft voice drifted through Raina's mind, the elusive soprano echoing with a child's curiosity through her senses.

*I'm Raina, and you are in my shop, the Kestrel's Loft.*

*I made it, then. I'm not back in that place. You aren't one of them...*

In what place? Gods, by the smell of her, it had to be somewhere near where Amber had been, for the sickeningly sweet stench of rotting life mingled with her other scents. *Yes, you made it to Sanctuary. I won't*

*let anyone harm you.*

Her aura was as black and blue as her body probably was under all that dirt, with streaks of pus-yellow and stinging reds blotched here and there over her chakras.

Not many knew this, but a body bruised in colors of the rainbow, with red being at its center and extending outward. She'd seen it once or twice, and each time the person's aura had reflected those same shades.

'As within, so without', what's in a person's soul is reflected in their aura. Why do you think so many people block that gift? It can be damn depressing.

'Ignorance is bliss' and all that.

Reaching a hand toward her guest, Raina felt Sheila's own minimal wards latch on to the warmth that her shields exuded when she was in the trance and begin to drain her dry.

Lady, a starving psychic vampire. They were literally the most draining patients to work on...no pun intended.

Pulling on the residual Power in the room from the numerous patrons throughout the day, she rolled it through her shields, cleansing it of the stress and anxiety that it had once represented, and fed it to Sheila.

\* \* \* \*

Jagur felt her pull on him as he entered the room grow stronger, not understanding what she was doing until he lowered his shields enough to see the

multi-colored mist floating through the room toward her and swirling into a bright silver light about her, before passing it on to what remained of their pack's Uta. Sheila was the female leader of the group, equal in Power and status with the Na-meer. But she was more than a leader; she was a Mother, Sister, and Lover. A Warrior in times of conflict and a Healer in times of peace.

She had been all those things to him. A female that was imbued with all the properties of their Goddess and given the name of Freya as an honor among the pack.

"All's clear, Raina."

\* \* \* \*

Nodding that she heard him, she took a few more minutes to sweep what was left of the residual energy into her shields and feed it to the starving woman that had slowly eased toward her until her tearstained face rested on Raina's warm calf.

Pulling from the trance, she lightly ran a hot palm over Sheila's head and rested it on her shoulder.

"If you'll pick her..."

"No!" The panic was creeping back into her voice with the prospect of Jagur touching her. Yet earlier, his voice had seemed to soothe her where Raina could not.

"Okay, Sheila, if you don't want him touching you, that's fine. But you'll have to walk with me then, because I can't carry you, no matter how light you may appear." Sheila nodded her head against Raina's

calf and painstakingly rose to her feet, each movement carefully calculated to do as little damage to her abused body as possible.

Why didn't she want Jagur touching her? She had recognized him, seemed to welcome his company, and yet...

No time.

Easing an arm around Sheila's waist and her right arm around Raina's shoulder, she kept her right hand with the athame free.

Never unprepared...

Easing her down the dark hallway that was now barely illuminated by a candle on the chopping block in the kitchen, she painstakingly helped her up the stairs with Jagur just a few steps ahead of them. He was waiting to help, as she had to practically lift Sheila up to make each step.

When they'd reached the top, Sheila felt more like a sumo wrestler than the waif she had been at the bottom of the stairs, and both of their foreheads were moist with the exertion.

The patio had never looked more welcoming. The cold tiles sapped the warmth from the bottom of her feet but grounded her in the reality of why she was barefoot, making her push away what had happened until she had time alone to bathe and decide if she was going to be upset or not.

Delayed shock syndrome...gotta love it.

Jagur opened her front door with her nod of consent and entered her Sanctuary with all the traditional measures. She felt him drop his shields to a minimal, send out a greeting to the wards that he



was there in good intent, and let them swirl about him to verify this, before going more than a few feet within the door.

Raina eased in with Sheila behind him. She appeared to need a bath just as badly as Raina felt like having one. Warm water and a soft washcloth had always seemed to ease Jagur. Maybe it would be a welcome idea to Sheila as well.

There was a divided philosophy among the Healers, whether, when healing, one should first take care of the body or the spirit.

Some said that the body couldn't heal without the spirit being whole. The other group said the exact opposite. That if the body was not whole, the spirit wouldn't have the reserves to heal.

Raina was of the mind that you do what you can, when you can, and leave the rest to Time and the will of the one being healed. No matter how good the Healer, if the receiver did not wish to be well, then there was truly nothing they could do.

She truly hoped this wasn't the case with Sheila. She'd had those that simply wished to move on to the Summer Land, and once the spirit is set on that course, the body is soon to follow.

Wordlessly, they all headed down the hallway and stopped short one room from Raina's. The guest bedroom was done in shades of violet, from the dark purple rugs that covered the floor to the misty violet gauze that hung about the white oak canopy bed.

She had intended to bring Sheila to her room, but something had stopped her. An instinct, and intuition. Whatever it was, it felt right to have her

here in the confines of a room the color of fire and water combined.

The bathroom was almost as big as her own, but the bathtub was an antique porcelain claw foot, more than large enough for the demure stature of the woman leaning against her.

"Jagur, can you go into the bathroom and fill the tub. There are some oils on the rim. I want you to use Lily of the Valley; it will help her see more clearly." Jagur nodded, his gaze roaming over them both quickly before turning to do as she asked.

"Okay, Sheila, we need to get these clothes off you, and you into the water..." She didn't have to hear the words of denial to know that there was no way she was going to get this girl in that bath unclothed.

The clothing had become the physical thread that held together whatever was left of her shields...and possibly whatever was left of Her.

"No."

Nodding that she'd heard her, she eased her into one of the two lavender overstuffed chairs by the window, then sat in the one across from her.

"Little one, I'm not asking that you trust me. You have no reason to do so after the inkling of what I feel you've been through. But as you said earlier, you have reached the Loft. I give you my full protection, and you may stay here as long as you wish. But I need to know what forces I'm inviting into battle to keep you safe." Sheila's body had drooped further into the chair when she'd mentioned the Loft, but had become rigid once again with her last words.

"I would not call them to battle, Healer. Not for all

the heads of the Lan..."

"Raina, the bath is ready." Jagur's words were louder than they had needed to be, and the force behind them sent Sheila scurrying back into herself, huddling in the chair like some kicked puppy.

Getting up very slowly, she gave Sheila a smile of reassurance and called the wards of the room to find a storm she could leach off of.

Sheila hadn't set off her wards because there simply wasn't anything there to set them off. She was less than Numb; she was non-existent to all things that dwelled in the ether.

Touching her shoulder lightly as she passed, she was rewarded with a faint smile from beneath all that dirt, and the beauty that she once was became evident.

Now...

Walking silently over to Jagur, she jerked her head toward the hall and waited for him to pass her before she headed out as well, leaving the door open a few inches.

Leaning forward so that she could keep her words from carrying, she stopped herself from pointing a finger in his chest and calling him an ass.

"If you have issues with Sheila, they need to be put in check for another time. I cannot, no... will not work with her while you're hanging like some dark cloud over her head..."

Someone had passed through her wards downstairs. The faint jingling of the bells downstairs confirmed it.

Power rushed down the hall, up the stairs, and to

her front door, where it suddenly stopped... inhumanly fast.

"Raina? Are you in?" *Mickey?*

"Raina! Gods, if you're in, please give us leave to enter!" *Loren?*

"Raina!" *Balder?*

All of them were calling out to her at once, and she could feel their anxiety rolling down the hall, prickling against her senses.

She had automatically thrown up her casting wards. Those that made Sacred Space within them. Those that could not be passed without some serious consequences.

"Yes, all, I'm fine. Be you of good intent, well come."

"So mote it be." All three voices said it with more enthusiasm than she had heard in a long time, but it was nothing compared to their relief at seeing her standing in the hall, and in one piece.

Balder was the first to reach her, nudging Jagur aside as he bent down to take her into a hug, lifting her off her feet when he straightened up.

Raina had known that Balder loved her, but not the depths of it. Not until that moment had it ever occurred to her that his flirtations were anything but simply that; something he did with a friend who adored him.

Wrapping her arms around his considerable neck, she hugged him back, placing her head on his shoulder...and caught the faint scent of perfume... and sex.

Well, no one said he was a monk.

"So, I didn't interrupt anything, did I?" Raina teased.

Grinning through the faint blush that tinted his cheeks, he saw the knowing in her eyes and the acceptance, if not the return, of his feelings for her. And thank the gods, the same adoration that had always been there remained.

"You too, doll." Raina whispered.

Nodding, he eased her down to the ground, gave her one more quick hug, and stepped back so both Loren and Mickey could embrace her in turn.

Balder was the first one to sense the presence of another in the room. He took an instinctive step toward the door, before stopping and turning his gaze to Jagur.

"Is Sheila in there?" With Jagur's nod, he was walking past them, the other two following, and back into the room they all went.

Sheila was standing by the window, but from what Raina was sensing, she wasn't contemplating the dark window across from her in the other building, but something further off or deeper in.

"Sheila?" Balder had stopped a few feet from her and dropped to his knees at the blank look she gave him.

"What's happened to her? I thought she was going to the Virgin Islands for the summer?" Mickey's voice started to edge further from the calm and serene place that Raina needed right now for Sheila, so she took him lightly by the arm and nodded for the others to go back out of the room.

Balder remained kneeling silently by Sheila, and

Raina had no wish to try and move him.

"Balder, watch over her while we go to the kitchen and get Sheila something to eat." His only response was a nod as she gave him her athame.

They all left him there, kneeling before her like some devout worshipper of a distant statue, and headed down the hall and into the kitchen.

When she came into the kitchen, Mickey touched his nose for a second too long, an impish grin creeping across his face, before Loren just gave him a disgusted look and sat down at the table.

"Raina, not to say that you being clad in so little is bothering me, but it's more than possible that we'll be having some more guests soon...and, well..." Mickey didn't know what else to say, as his cheeks had begun to heat a deeper shade of pink than normal. Raina just stood there for a second, before running a hand over her bare midriff with a sigh of disgust.

"Go and...get my clothes from the sink downstairs. I'll go get something a bit less blood-spattered on before we have more guests."

Watching the others head across the hall and into the now brightly lit living room, she turned and headed the opposite direction, back to her room, greeting the wards as she entered, and headed for the bed. The last time she'd remembered seeing her wrap, it'd been on the floor by the...

"Entertaining guests in your under-things, Raina? Why wasn't I invited to this party? I have the silkiest black boxers..."

Aidan.

Spinning on her heel, she searched the shadowed

room, finding him sprawled in her overstuffed, recently velvet covered, favorite sit and contemplate the world in chair. One leg was hanging over the arm, black leather boots up to mid-thigh encasing some dark-colored, soft-looking, skin-tight pants, and a doublet of deepest sangria wine. His wavy leonine hair flowed silkily over his shoulders.

“Well, aren’t we the one to speak about odd clothing while entertaining, Aidan, being that you look like you just came out of a porn based in the time period of the Three Musketeers.”

Raising his finger, he drew a one in the air, at the same time making a hissing noise. “One point for the damsel in the cute gray undies.”

Taking a deep breath, she didn’t know if she wanted to smile at him or hit him. Deciding on neither, she made her way to the bed, and picked up the black silk wrap from the floor.

Turning her back to him, she slid into it and knotted the belt at her waist.

“But speaking of illicit behavior, luv, if you’d like to pretend there were some cameras...”

“Gods, Aidan, I have just had the worst freaking night, and all you can focus on is sex...” She didn’t hear him move, didn’t feel the air stir behind her, until his hand was touching the back of her neck while an arm wrapped loosely around her waist from behind.

“And what else in the world is more worth talking about than a mating of two souls for the briefest of seconds in some orgasmic collision of bodies?” Heat rocked through her body at his words, pooling at the

apex of her thighs. Raina ordered her feet to step away from him, but felt her body ease against his in the dark of the room.

“Aidan...”

\* \* \* \*

Running his nose against her hair, he breathed in the scent of sandalwood and jasmine, and...blood. It floated around her body like a cloud, swirling with her unique chemistry. But it was the smell of corruption lingering on her skin that had his hackles rising.

Placing an arm on her shoulder, he turned her around, keeping his arm about her waist like one of Fred Astaire's dance steps in slow motion, his gaze searching her face for a trace of pain.

“What have you been up to since last we spoke...?” He had felt her fear, like a bug creeping up his spine as he’d fenced with Don Giacomo on the roof of Haven. The swords expert had come down from Anaheim to practice with one of his largest patrons. He wasn’t one of the Numb, he simply refused to recognize what he could not see with the physical eye...or kill with one of his swords.

They had crossed blades, and Aidan had taken a deep slice to his upper arm with the momentary distraction before he’d left. Making his excuses to one of the few that was not of the Loyal that Aidan called friend. Then was down the street and to the Loft’s back door, asking the casting wards for entrance.

Once again, he felt that warm spirit that he had the



first time check him out, then allowed him in without alerting Raina. Just as he heard the bells ring wildly at the front door and the sound of Jagur's voice.

So he had waited in the darkness of the kitchen, guarding her back as he silently followed them unnoticed up the stairs.

When they entered her dwelling, he simply followed them in, shutting the door behind him as he felt her casting wards go up for her inner Sanctuary. When they had gone into the room down the hall, he had silently walked past the door and into the room he knew was hers from seeing her standing at the window from the street...and waited.

"Why do you smell of someone else's blood, Guardian?" Breathing in deeply, he recognized the scents of corruption and fear, but the others were not so easy to place.

Greed had a flavor of its own; it was humid and smelled of rotting food. Dishonor was like the sharp sting of the sourest lemon.

And the last, like the smell of a baby's skin, laced with a corpse's stench.

Hopelessness...

All of these things swirled about her, emanating from only a few drops of blood on her bra and what had soaked into her pores from that momentary touch with sopping shirt and pants.

\* \* \* \*

"Like I said, Aidan, it's been a long night..." Bless it, her fingertips were going numb, and she was

becoming colder by the second. Delayed shock syndrome.

Gods, not now.

"Aidan, if I don't get into some warm clothes, we're going to have some issues here...gods, my knees are shaking."

Aidan recognized the graying of her aura for shock, as she had the symptoms. Sweeping a hand under her legs, he picked her up as if she weighed no more than a soaked kitten and headed for the bathroom.

"Aidan, this is really not..."

"Sshhh, Rainfall, let me. I don't know how many other chances I will be getting like this with you in the future."

Shaking her head at the devilish grin that dimpled his cheeks, she had to admit that it felt damn good to have someone take care of her for a change. Even if just for a little while.

Easing them through the door, he carried her over to the tub, leaned over, and pulled both the silver handles. The sounds of rushing water filled the room as a burst of heat drifted up from the water; shooting from the faucet as he sat down on the edge and top step carefully.

"You really do have to invite me up here when you don't have company to entertain."

Bright blessings, she'd forgotten! "Aidan, I really have to get back to them..."

"Nonsense, I'm sure they will understand if you take a bath while they figure out where to go from here." Touching her jaw, he ran a finger down its

stubborn length, sweeping over her full lower lip. "It's alright to let someone else shoulder the weight once in a while, Raina."

Taking in a deep breath, she was filled with his scent, and for the first time, she wanted to believe the words he said. And maybe just the smallest part of her truly did.

Shaking her head at the wild thoughts rolling through her mind, she leaned away from him and grabbed the sandalwood oil from the shelf in the wall by the tub, pouring some of it into the swirling water.

Foreign spices and moonlight upon the desert sands filled her mind as she placed the top back in the crimson teardrop bottle.

"Tower of the South, Fire. I call upon you to burn away the corruption and fear that hovers over me." Touching the water, she brought it to her forehead and brushed it over her third eye.

"Tower of the West, Water. I ask that you cleanse my sight, so that I may see with clear vision what is to come."

\* \* \* \*

Aidan barely breathed as she called the elements to her while he held her. It was a gift to cast with another, for it meant they trusted you within their circle of sacred space. But for a solitaire to cast while touching, it was the deepest of honors.

And she had done so without thought or hesitation, as if she had called circle with him for lifetimes.

Sensing one of his elements swirl about them, he had to quickly force himself to accept the cleansing of Water, as Fire played about the edges of his shields and burned away the last scent of corruption that flavored her Power.

Testing the water with his fingers, he sent out a greeting to the other Tribe's element as he leaned over her, kissing her hair as he did so.

\* \* \* \*

It was hot, but soothingly so, and she nodded her head. Standing up, he untied her belt and helped her slide out of the black silk wrap before easing her into the tub. The water swirled around her bra-clad chest as she leaned her head back against the side with closed eyes, sighing with satisfaction as the heat surrounded her chilled flesh.

Running a shaking hand through her hair, she looked at the man sitting on the edge of the tub, wondering at her ease around him. As if she had known him for a lifetime.

*I've only known him for a day, and in that time he has seen me run a gambit of emotions.*

*Gods...I don't even know his last name.*

The knock at her bedroom door had them both letting out an unconscious sigh. The outside world had once again found them.

"Raina. When you're done with your bath and dressed...well, those others we spoke about...they're here, and your clothes are in the sink in the kitchen." Mickey sounded a bit uneasy, which meant her living

room was filled with people he didn't know or Loren was giving him grief for something.

Running a wet hand over her face, she forced herself to sound enthusiastic when she spoke.

"Fine, Mickey, I'll be done in a few minutes. Thank you."

"Kay." The sound of him turning around at the door and tripping over one of the rugs in the hall brought a quick smile to her face. He only got clumsy when he was flustered.

Focusing once again on the achingly beautiful man sitting on the side of her tub, she took a moment to notice that the steam from the hot water had turned his hair a darker gold, and his tanned skin had the slightest sheen to it.

"You really are beautiful."

\* \* \* \*

It was the last thing he had been expecting her to say. 'Get out now' had been a high probability on his list.

"My thoughts exactly." He saw the humor roll across her eyes before she gave him a lopsided grin.

"Vain creature, then, aren't you?" She had deliberately misunderstood him.

"Well, one of us has to be, Miss I'm-Oblivious-To-My-Own-Charms."

\* \* \* \*

Grinning, she decided that maybe it wouldn't be so awful to like him after all. "Out, Porthos, and let me

bathe."

Standing, he pulled down the front of his doublet and shook his head. "I look nothing like him. If you're going to compare me to a Musketeer, Dartanian in my younger years, but not Porthos the Pirate."

"Younger years? You're not exactly ancient now, Aidan." Raina caught the brief flash of humor cross his face, and then it was gone.

"No, Raina...I'm not at all old compared to some I know." And with that vague sentence, he leaned over at the waist and gave her a bow worthy of the French court before the Revolution. "Another time then." Dipping his hand into the water, he brought her now warm fingertips to his lips, kissing the drops of water from the back of her hand.

Shivering, she took her tingling hand back, dashing it under the water, and when she looked up, he was gone.

## CHAPTER TEN

As silently as he'd followed them down the hall just a half hour before, he retraced his steps, stopping in the doorway of the living room, and noting that the gold-and-silver-threaded Persian rugs were covered with sprawling members of the Utameer; the chairs and couches already being full.

The living room was made of the same dark wood floors and shelves, with a rich cream on the walls and varying shades of cream, maroon, and gold furniture. It was warm and inviting, representing the softhearted side to his witch that she only showed to her friends.

He'd have to make sure he saw more of it...

The Uta of their pack and the one called Balder were still absent, but Aidan recognized their Na-meer right away with his amber eyes giving away nothing as he watched him from across the room, leaning against the mantle of the fireplace.

"I take it that it's agreed. She's to be given the knowledge of what we are and to choose who she will parley for once she's spoken to the Council?" The talking stopped when he first began, and his answer

was greeted by pure silence. None of them moved, not a single breath, all heads turned toward a creature they had been taught to hate from the time Knowledge of what they were was given to them.

"Aye, Aidan, Che-awk of the Dagda's children. It is agreed."

Aidan scanned the sea of faces, feeling the waves of hate, fear, and distrust seeping through the pours of their shields.

That was the thing about shields. Strong emotions tended to get through whether you wished them to or not. Ask any Empath.

Nodding, he let the calm nothingness he felt for them roll across the room. He did not know them, had never spoken their names in anger or joy.

The bridge had to begin somewhere.

And when that universal truth, that all too simple thought crossed his mind, the silver mist that had so startled him in the street; the sense of the Other that had told him to protect the Sacred washed over his eyes once again. Running down his body in silver rivulets as it spread across the floor and through the ether.

Those of the pack that it neared scrambled out of its way, leaping over furniture and friends alike to stop it from touching them. No one trusting their senses when their gifts told them that a stream of the Other was flowing toward them...from a Lang.

When it reached Jagur, still leaning against the mantle, he bent down on one knee and placed his hand before its path on the floor, as if seeing a silver string of Power swirl across the floor was something



he saw every day...and waited.

The silver stream crept toward his open hand, easing onto the fingertips, pooling like warm tears in his palm. When he still gave no protest, it wrapped around his arm to sway across his collarbone, stretching both directions, to touch each of his chakras in their turn, aligning them.

*"Protect her, child of Earth and Water...Let no harm come to the Sacred..."*

The voice was both masculine and feminine, as if two spoke with one mind, misting his eyes from tears with the feeling of homesickness that swept over his heart.

Nodding his head, he took a deep breath, feeling the silver stream flow into his lungs and spread into every part of his body, a spark igniting in his senses, making for just the briefest second...the connection between all things crystal clear in his mind...and then that sleeping place within him was dark once again.

Aidan could only watch as the one he had known for so long as an enemy accepted with an open palm what he had fought.

Who was this man that smelled faintly of his witch? Who let tears roll down his cheeks in front of his pack? In front of one he had known as an enemy since his Awakening.

"What have you done?" He recognized the platinum blond woman walking toward him as Loren, friend of his witch, and had no wish to do what he saw rolling through her eyes, yet she seemed sure as Hades set on her path.

"What have you done?" He felt her shields shift

just before she leapt, an athame appearing in her hands as she raised them over her head to strike him down.

A sacred blade wielded by a witch was one of the only ways to kill one of either Tribe. For the Uta to attack a Che-awk was a sign of dishonor, for the gods had decreed that they were not allowed to kill outside of their own kind.

If his Power was greater than hers, the blade would be deflected. If not...

The ark of her arm swept down as he watched an arm curl around her waist, jerking back her blade inches from his throat.

Jagur held her against his chest, one hand around her waist while the other tightened slowly on her wrist until with a small cry of pain and the bruising of bone, she released the athame.

"No, little sister, not like this...never like this." His words were but a whisper against her ear, yet they had all heard him.

"He's going to take her from us, Jagur! How can you let him after all..."

"Enough! If she chooses to represent the Tribes of Fire and Air, then that is her choice to make, and we will stand by it." Jagur gave her a little shake when she opened her mouth to protest again, before she finally dropped her head. Tears rolling down her cheeks as her body slumped against his.

Power...

Rolling thunder, golden-tinged warmth swept through the room, caressing their shields, calling their bodies to join with another's in a sweet tempest of

passion.

“Sheila...”

\* \* \* \*

Balder waited at her feet. Waited for her eyes to drop to his, or a hand to touch him, inviting to be touched in turn.

Shifting his site, he went from the physical to the ethereal, his third eye, and it was then that he saw her watching him.

Her face was turned toward the window, looking out into the deep darkness of nothing in particular, yet she was focused on him, her shields sweeping lightly against his own like a fairy’s wing brushing his cheek for the briefest of heartbeats.

In the Ether, time has no place or relevance. There can be no deceit or treachery, for only what one truly is has any relevance.

Physical words are as seldom as rain in the Sahara, for they are not needed. Thoughts and emotions are heard like an echo of the bagpipes, drifting across the moors at dusk to seep sweetly into your soul.

*I wish to touch you, Sheila...*

*I am no longer clean...*

*Nay, but you are still Sheila. No dirt or grime could hide this from me...*

*I am no longer clean, Balder; they have taken all that was pure within me...*

*They?...*

*Those that use their gifts to destroy and degradate...*

*But they did not destroy you, love; you stand here beside*

*me. Your presence taking the breath from my lungs...the will from my heart...*

Turning her head, she brought fawn-colored eyes, haunted with an unknown darkness down to his face. But with him being of such a height, she truly didn't have to look all that far down, even with him kneeling.

"You still think me worthy of your love, when another has taken all that was truly mine?" Her voice was rusty, like rainfall on steel, and etched with self-loathing.

Lifting one large, callused hand, he touched her hip and gently squeezed until he could feel the muscle beneath the flesh. But the tingle of Power was gone, as if what had truly made Sheila was gone, and all that remained was the walking husk of her mortal self.

"Impossible." Nodding her head, she let out a watery laugh, more the companion of misery than joy if ever one was so.

"They told me they could. That they could take what the gods had given me and make it their own

Balder shook his head in disbelief, yet what he was not sensing was proof to her words. "What is truly yours can never be taken, only given to another. And if they have tricked you into doing so, then you can take it back."

Sheila heard the certainty in his words, but he hadn't been there. When those freakish brothers had drugged her with wormwood, chained her to the walls, beaten her, and taken everything that was intrinsically Sheila.

"Nay, Balder." Standing, he lifted her unresisting form into his arms and headed into the bathroom, the smell of some healing flower and warm water calling him to it like a mother's arms to a lost child.

The light had been left off, leaving three candles, one red, one black and one white, flickering in the calming room. Pale shades of blue and purple rolled through the room, the skylight letting a little luminescence from the stars and lighting the claw footed tub that rested beneath it.

Balder knew he held her against his chest, but it was as though he held a delicate glass bottle. One that was now empty, when in his memory, it had always been overflowing with the joy of life and love that she had for the pack.

Reaffirming that she would be this person again, that they could call back what was given in trickery, he set her bare feet upon the plush lavender rugs by the bath and began to remove the grime-covered clothes from her shoulders.

"No!" she cried.

Fighting back his misery, for she had felt enough of her own, he leaned back and eased her chin up so that her doe-eyes saw the adoration lighting the ice blue fire that had begun to blaze fiercely in his gaze.

"I have seen you as the gods made you when we bathed as Family in the ocean, when we ran naked in the rain up in the mountains. There is no shame in the form you were given..."

"No, Balder, I am wretched now, not fit for the beauty of your eyes..."

Catching his breath at the certainty in her words,

he quelled the urge to howl his rage at those that had done this. And swear to the gods that the bastards would soon be meeting a long blade in the small of their worthless backs. "No, Sheila, you are the same beauty that walks through my dreams each night. The same creature that makes my heart clench with wanting, my tongue ache for the taste of your skin..." Raising his hand slowly, so as not to startle this wild creature that stared at him in disbelief, he cupped her neck as if she were the most precious of creations and brought his head downward.

He felt her breathing quicken in panic, not passion, but kept true his course, letting his lips finally brush against her smudged forehead, once, then again.

"You will always be beautiful to these eyes. No dirt or dark craft can change that." He heard the halting breath before the smell of warm salt tears lifted to his nose.

Lowering her gaze, she began to remove her clothing before him, letting the shredded garments fall to the rug at her feet, fighting the screaming in her mind that told her to run from this man, that he would hurt her as the others had, that they were all the same...

But it was the quiet, insidious voices of the dark-robed ones that made her pause. Asking if she was willing to take the chance of his rejection when he saw the disgusting thing that she had become. That she was not worthy of his touch, for he was pure...and she was putrid...

Spiting them, she ripped the clothes from her body all the faster, knowing if she stopped, she would

never take them off again. A spark of the defiant creature she had once been raising its head from the grime.

Balder watched silently as she frantically shredded the clothes from her form, leaving the rags on the floor until nothing was left but a black and blue body with healing lacerations from sharp knives and back-biting whips.

Holding his breath, he ordered his emotions to calm, not to let her know the agony he felt at seeing her abused this way. For it wouldn't help her now. She had no use for his pity...she had enough on her own.

Raising her hand to him, he took it lightly, letting her lean on him as she lifted her foot and entered the soothing warmth of the bath; water was like the mother's womb to them.

Whenever they felt lost or confused, they returned to water, whether it be the ocean, a pond, or a sink full, She dwelled within all that was life giving. Tribes of Water and Earth, drummers of the deep cave, callers of the dawn.

Sheila eased into the water, the scent of Lily of the Valley easing over her mind, sweeping away the soot and pain that had clouded it for what seemed like an eternity of nights.

Balder once again went to his knees, but this time in relief. Waiting until she leaned forward so he could run a cloth across her back and shoulders, taking care not to touch the jagged edges that a whip had made or the symbols that had been carved into her flesh with a brand or blade.

The only thing he could rejoice in was that the marks in time would fade, for only a sacred blade could do permanent damage. Anyone who had done this knew nothing of the Sacred.

The water quickly turned to a rusty black as the dirt left her skin. Reaching down, he pulled the plug and turned the clear water on to rush into the tub as the dark drained out.

Moving water had an energy all its own. He would have preferred to bathe her in a moving river, but this would have to do for now.

Taking the shampoo from the rim of the tub, he took the pitcher that sat beside it and filled it with the clean water, then carefully poured it over her head until the water ran clear. Pouring some of the shampoo into his hands, he smelled night-blooming jasmine, and lathered her long hair until it once again glowed like red amber.

Pouring the water from the pitcher once again, filling and pouring until the water ran clear, he only stopped when her shoulders had eased and bent forward, her head resting upon her knee.

When the water ran clear about her pale calves, he placed the stopper back in the tub and filled it once again, all this done without a word spoken, for she was of the Tuk-cha, the Family. Those of the pack did not need words as others did. What comforted him made her whole as well.

Lifting his gaze from her back, he searched the counter for the oils that he had smelled in the water. Teardrop vials in various colors sat on a pewter tray by the sink. Picking up one the color of dark wine, the



color of fertile possibilities, he lifted the stopper, and sniffed.

*Dreams...*

"Aye, Balder, that one..." She had heard the whisper in his mind as surely as if he'd spoken what the scent had said to his senses. Feeling his heart skip in relief, he brought the vial to her. Their fingertips lightly touching as she removed the stopper and tipped his hand, letting the oil swirl within the water and into her pores.

Replacing the stopper, she took the bottle from him and placed it on the floor before tugging on his hand ever so lightly and easing his palm against her cheek.

"Bright blessings, Balder." A tingling of Power rode up his fingertips, faint as a breeze on the flat surface of the sea yet there just the same.

"To you as well, Sheila..."

Her lips brushed across his palm, cool against his flesh, brought to memory the first time they had kissed all those years ago; beneath the full moon with the cold ocean water lapping about his hips.

"Aye, I remember that time as well, but you stepped away from me to swim with the dolphins until dawn," Sheila chided.

"Jagur was gone, and some thought that he wouldn't return. I couldn't betray him. You had just joined the Pack, and he had set me to watch over you before he left. I didn't want to take advantage..." Her surprised bark of laughter drew his eyes to hers; her eyes were still slightly puffy and discolored, but nothing like the rest of her body.

"I had thought you had no interest in me, that I

didn't compel you!" The shocked look on his face had her laughing once again, this time holding her sore ribs so as not to set them throbbing again. "Oh, gods, I needed that..."

When she cleared the tears of mirth from her eyes, he was kneeling beside the tub, the heat from his body radiating against the bare flesh of her shoulder. "You have compelled me from first scent, when you came to the pack all those years ago, no more than sixteen and looking for your Family..." His deep voice ran like a callused hand inside her skin, sending shivers up and down her spine, goose-bumps across her flesh.

Looking down her body, she saw the bruises and cuts, and the laughter that had lit her eyes dimmed.

"And now it's too late, I am no longer worthy..."

His lips stopped whatever other foolishness she had been about to spout. First one large hand and then the other came to cup her face. Her smaller hands slowly climbed up his arms and into his hair to hold him against her.

*You will always be worthy...in sackcloth, without a single Gift or knowledge of the Pack...you would still compel me to you...*

*Balder...*

*Bright Blessings, Uta, for you did not lose everything while in that dark place. You have always held my heart...*

Sheila gasped beneath him from the Power of his vow flowing through him and into her, a never-ending influx of Power that she had so needed. She took all that he freely gave her until he slumped against the tub, his breathing hard, head slightly

cloudy, reeling from the drain.

And it was then that she felt her own Power, calling to her from some distant place, that hell she had escaped from.

Using what Balder had so freely given, she called it back to her. Ripping her Power away from those that had stolen it.

Power, golden and warm, surged into her, familiar as a heartbeat, overjoyed at the reunion with its mistress. Filling her full to overflowing until the only thing she could do was give back to Balder what he had so selflessly given to her.

Turning into him, she wrapped her arms about his neck and meshed their lips together, not because that was needed to share the Gift, but because she wished to feel his lips upon hers, warm and wondrous once again.

*"You are mine, Balder, as I am yours..."*

*"Life-mate..."* The wonder in that one simple word caressed her senses as he lifted her from the bathtub, wet and willing, and gently settled her on the dark purple rugs scattered across the bathroom floor.

*"Let me worship you, Sheila..."* And he was answered by her joyful sob as she brought his lips down to hers, turning on her side to mold him to her form.

Shaking palms kept his lips meshed, biting, nuzzling with her own as his hands slid across the slippery, satin heat of her back, ever so careful with the woman he had thought beyond his reach.

Balder, for the first time in his existence, was consumed with a fear that his every touch might hurt

this fragile, blooming creature, making his touch whisper soft, and delicate. When everything in him screamed to roll her beneath him and fill her with his aching flesh.

Sheila's soft moans against his lips turned to frustrated whines as one of Balder's callused hands found her damp breast, while the other cupped her sex. Fingertips flicked and massaged against her clit, while his long middle finger found his way into her wet heat, stroking in and out of her as he left her lips to nip and lick his way down her chest. Taking her pebbled, rose-tinted nipple into his mouth.

Strong teeth gently nibbled upon her skin as his tongue circled the sensitive flesh, each nip and lave of his tongue heightened by the thrust of a finger into her aching body.

Balder felt her teeth rake his neck, his shoulder, before she lapped at the wounds with her hot tongue, her hands frantically working at his clothes as he eased a second finger into her slippery sex.

"Your clothes, Balder, I need your flesh...all of it..." Thrusting his fingers inside her once more, he growled low in his throat as she sank her teeth into his shoulder and tugged at his shirt.

The sound of seams ripping and what remained of his shirt thudding against the bathroom wall had him lifting his head from her breast to watch her eyes darken with appreciation.

Nipping at her rounded breast, he flashed his teeth at her as she licked her lips, her eyes devouring the site of so much gorgeous flesh revealed...and it belonged to her.

Hands that just an hour before had been colored with bruises stroked down his chest without a trace of discoloration, swirling not only within the fine hairs across his chest but the Power that was building between them...that same Power that he was pushing into her body with every thrust of his fingers and lave of his tongue.

Sheila sucked in a breath as he gently bit the underside of her healed breast. Moaning with frustration, she deftly unbuttoned his jeans and released him, long and hard, into her hands. Running her fingertip over the sensitive head, she smiled in satisfaction as she felt him catch his breath against her neck, his hips instinctively thrusting into her hand...but it wasn't enough.

"Gods, Balder, please...fill me with your flesh." She felt his entire body shiver at her words, before he slipped his fingers from within her and carefully rolled her onto her back.

Rising above her, he kept his weight on his elbows, hands diving into her hair as her hands cupped his jaw, his hips sliding between her unmarked thighs.

Lowering his head to hers, she found herself lost in his blue ice eyes and the Power that raged behind his heated gaze.

"I claim you as my life-mate, Sheila, flesh to flesh, Power to Power, until the light from my soul does extinguish in these eyes." Moving her hand down his chest, she once again found his hard cock, and moved the head of his shaft to her wet, aching core.

"And I claim you as my life-mate, Balder, flesh to flesh, Power to Power..." But the rest of her words

were lost on a blissful moan as he shifted his hips, pushing into her slowly until she had taken all of him within her, filling her, stretching her with his size.

Hips tilting to meet each thrust, nails clawing down his back until she gripped his hips, silently begging for harder, faster...

Heeding her wishes, he became more forceful with each agonizing thrust, grinding his pelvis against her clit as his lips found hers, biting, tongues swirling, breaths mingling, until they were but one creature of writhing flesh and bone...lost to the Compelling that they sent out into the rooms beyond...

\* \* \* \*

Raina felt the Power flowing from the other side of the wall, healing and good. Whatever Balder had done to reach her, she was now screaming her defiance to those that had tried to take what was hers like the warrior-queen Mebh of ancient Celtic times.

Taking the rolling Power as simply as it was given, she rose out of the tub as it swirled around her and removed the soaked bra and panties. Dropping them in the sink, she grabbed her wrap off the floor and slid into it as she headed into her bedroom.

Lust. Passion. Need. A Compelling like she had never felt, urging her feet to the hall door. She continued down the hall to her living room where a group of people, some of which she recognized, writhed on the floor with each other, touching, caressing.

An orgy? Why was she always the last to know?

Taking a step back as the release of sexual Power washed over her shields, she stopped when a chest came against her back and arms circled her waist.

Aidan. She knew his touch as if he had done this a million times, woken with him to watch the sun rise for the first time over the horizon within his arms.

But something stopped her from arching back against him and rolling her head against his shoulder in pleasure.

A pair of amber eyes watched her from just a few feet away inside the room, with Catrina and Mickey oblivious to him as they rolled around together at his feet. A fist clenched to his side as he watched Aidan run his lips along her neck.

Reaching out a hand toward him, she let Aidan pull her back into the hallway as Jagur followed, stepping over those on the floor, stopping a breath away from her as Aidan leaned back against the hall wall, her body cupped against him.

"Gods, Jagur, it's the Compelling..."

"No, Raina, it's you that draws me here, even if I can't remember what we once were, my body doesn't seem to have forgotten..."

Moaning as Aidan found the sensitive spot beneath her ear with his teeth, she pulled Jagur to her and pressed her mouth to his.

Lips, hot velvet against her neck, teeth nipping, tongue soothing, urging her on as Jagur's lips crushed down upon hers. Cool air flowed across her form before being replaced with heat and soft cotton.

Leaning back into coaxing heat, she felt her thigh lifted, hips shifting, as hot fingertips played across her

navel, then lower against her clit as fingers found and parted wet flesh to tease her.

A hot finger pushed past her lower lips, sliding into the slick heat. A moan was caught in Jagur's mouth as he inserted a second digit, stretching her as he found her G-spot.

Power rode her, was pushed into her with every breath, every nip on her neck, making the throbbing ache between her thighs near unbearable as Jagur shifted her hips.

Cool air replaced by hot skin between her thighs was her only warning. Hard, hot satin pressed against her wet core as Aidan rolled his tongue against the pulse point on her neck.

Nights making love beneath the stars in thigh-high grasses, sketching him lying nude beneath the moon, Luna's amber eyes....

"No! Gods, no!" Pushing into Aidan as she pushed Jagur away, she heard Aidan's head knock back against the wall with a thud as Jagur stepped back from her, then turned and moved out the door so quickly, the only thing she saw was a blur of motion.

"Gods, he's fast."

Chuckling as he rubbed the back of his head, Aidan dropped a quick kiss on her shoulder before he shook off the last of the Compelling and turned her in his arms.

"Aye, Rain-fall, those of the Utameer can move faster than your eyes can follow; it's one of their gifts."

Some memory tried to surge within her mind, but it fell from her grasp.



"The what? Aidan, how hard did you knock your head?"

Shaking his head, he bent down and lightly nipped her lips before leaning back against the wall and pulling her up against his chest as he closed her robe.

Resting her head against his velvet-covered shoulder; she listened to his heartbeat as it began to slow until her eyes drifted shut.

"Now that, my little witch, is something for another day. Sleep now, you'll need your rest for the days to come." Easing into dreams, she knew that he'd cast a spell upon her, but her body didn't care as it fell into slumber and dreams of amber-eyed babies and moon-filled nights.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Settling Raina into her bed, he laid a kiss softly on her lips, brought the comforter to her chin, and called her wards up in the room.

*"Let no harm come to your mistress..."*

Sensing the wards raising Raina's casting shields as he closed her door, he knew that she would be safe, even from him.

Walking back down the hall, he felt the ones called Balder and Sheila twirl within the madness of their own Compelling...ah, to be young.

When he reached the living room, most of those that had been writhing on the floor had gone, leaving only the two young ones, still oblivious, rolling about on the floor by the fireplace.

Shaking his head at their youthful exuberance, he crossed over the threshold and closed her front door.

"You can't have her, Che-awk, or whatever it is that they call you. She belongs to the Pack, to the Utameer." Ah, the lovely Loren...

"I don't plan on taking her from her friends and family, cave-dweller..."

"Lies!" Stepping from the shadows of the stairway

down to the kitchen, Loren once again held a blade in her hand, but from the vibrations, it was not an athame.

"If she chooses to represent us within the Council, that's her right..." Aidan said reasonably.

"The hell it is! You're using a fey charm on her!"

"Watch what you say, Garou...or you might just see what a true fey charm can do."

Stepping away from Raina's door, he waited for her to come to him. It would be a possibly painful encounter, but not deadly. If he won, she owed him her fealty for thirteen passings of the full moon in the sky. If she won, he would swear allegiance to her for the same.

Honor was everything among the Tribes...but this one had forgotten that in a moment of rage. How Utameer of her.

A creature without honor was useless. A creature without control was less than useless. Only magic and athames could be used in the Trials, as it had been from the beginning.

Guns were for those without Power. The weak, or the Numb. No Tribe would ever use one, for it meant that they were less than weak, that they were turning their back on the ways of the Ancients. Guns were created by those that had no memory of the old ways. They needed no 'great equalizer', for those without Gifts would never be equal to those that walked the Old Path.

Bending his index finger in a taunting reply to her unsheathed blade, he waited for her leg muscles to tense. Leaping into the air with a blurring speed, she

let out a roar of anger as Aidan became one with the night, fading into the shadows that surrounded them.

"Come out and face me, you coward!"

Now this was a bit of a conundrum. If he beat her, she would be bound to him for thirteen moons. He'd never be able to trust her. Her loyalty would always be in question, hence the Loyal would either abuse or taunt her...and Raina would protest. Yet he could not be bound to her.

The only choice was to retreat into the darkness and hold this confrontation off as long as possible. Damn this Loki-blessed conscious that had begun to plague him. Just a few nights ago, he would have taken her challenge and tossed her to the Loyal as their plaything. They wouldn't have hurt her...well, not much.

It would have been a much more subversive game they would have played then, until she was completely loyal to the Lang or magically broken. Now, neither seemed a feasible option.

So, he made a tactical retreat. Calling upon the shadows to cloak his form as an Air element swept his scent to the four winds, he silently moved past her tense form, sweeping through her shadow, sending a shiver through her body. Loren knew now without a doubt that he had spared her tonight with a single shadowy touch. Her shields flared as she tried to deny him, but he sliced right through them, making his act of mercy perfectly clear and to the point. Noting the waves of fear rolling off her skin, he left the roof, her aura jagged and gray with it. He knew she would not soon forgive him this noble act. Well,

you can't charm them all...

No, she was not a worthy adversary. Now Jagur, he could prove interesting. To have their pack leader loyal to the Gathering...hmmmmm.

Easing down the stairs, rolling with the numerous shadows there, he headed for Haven and those of the Clan that would be waiting for him.

It was time to hunt.

\* \* \* \*

Jagur sped past the lingering clubbers walking back to their cars, past the silent warehouse flats where he could hear some sleeping in drunken oblivion while others made beds creak and throats moan with the pleasures of the flesh.

Blocking as best he could, he stayed in his birth form. To go to any other would only amplify his senses, and he never shifted in the city. There were simply too many people.

Heading inland and to the south, burning energy faster than he could ever replace it, he followed his nose to the Sweetwater Reservoir and his home that bordered it.

High golden grasses and the scent of horses and hay filled his senses as he extended himself beyond his shields and felt his body instinctively begin its Shift into another form.

Back arching, legs shortening, hands curling to large, dark-gold paws with their hunting claws extended. It felt like a long stretch after being cooped up too long in a small car. Easing muscles back into

their natural form, while at the same time removing a hood from over your head, and opening your senses to a thousand different possibilities.

He could hear Tara, his Percheron, as she shifted her weight while she slept, her young one resting soundly within her, its heartbeat jumping slightly in recognition as it felt his familiar presence sweep over them.

The high grass swaying, crickets continued to chirp as he passed them, as much one of them as the earth. Fish splashed against the surface of the man-made lake as a gray fox dashed from some sage scrub after a rabbit over the next hill...and men.

From the smell of the beer on their breath, it wasn't the Fish and Game that patrolled the lake for poachers, but the poachers themselves.

Ah...the much needed distraction...

Crouching to the ground, his furred belly rubbing against the grasses, he waited for them as they edged around the reservoir and toward his patiently waiting form.

Feet shifted, hips swaying, long golden tail swishing lightly in agitation that they were here, too close to his home, and smoking during the height of fire season. The glow of one of the butts burned brightly in the night as it flew through the air toward him, landing a few feet away in a patch of jumping choya cactus.

A low, rumbling growl slid over his throat as he waited...waited...waited...

"So I told her if'n she didn't get in that kitchen and cook me my dinner, she'd be tasting the back of

my..."

Now.

"Holy Jesus!"

Jagur knew he couldn't mark them. If he did, they would start hunting the mountain lions again, and that was not an option.

Retracting his claws, he knocked the first man over, landing on his chest and riding him to the ground as he screamed with the piercing clarity of a terrified washerwoman, while his companion took off over the field, heading for the road.

One thing about Bonita. Gopher holes. A pained scream and a snapping of bone heralded his fall before he started to cuss and swear to his god at the same time that if he got him outa this alive, he'd never...

The one beneath him had fainted, whether from fear or simply passing out from the amount of alcohol Jagur could smell in his system, it was hard to say.

But both would definitely need to change their briefs when they got home.

Mouth dropping in a cat's grin, he bounded off the poacher's chest and went back to where he had seen the cigarette fall. Last summer, one of their worst forest fires had been from some asshole flicking out a cigarette from his car on the highway.

There. The acrid smell of chemicals, some of which he recalled from biology in college that were used to preserve the dead critters in jars. He never understood the attraction.

The butt had stopped glowing, resting harmlessly in a patch of dirt beneath the cactus; he kicked some

more dirt over it just in case, then called to the land around him. Sending his will out into the ether and deep within the earth beneath his paws, he aligned with all that was of the Mother and cast out his request.

*Erase my presence from your surface, let no trace be found of me or mine.*

*Watch over and protect your remaining children, so that they may survive this storm of Man's making...*

Thunder rolled in the distance as a flash of lightning lit the valley for a moment with daylight clarity, revealing the Fish and Game that were making their way down the hill on the other side of the huge reservoir. It would take them a while on foot, but with the other one still screaming, the poachers shouldn't be too hard to find. They weren't going anywhere fast.

Growling in thanks as the first warm drop of rain landed on his furred ear, he headed home, leaving no prints to mark his path.

He needed to gather some blades before he went looking for the ones that had taken more than one of the Utameer. But he would need the help of those witches loyal to the Tuk-cha.

If there were rogues running wild out there, only witches or humans of free will were allowed to kill both Tribes. Now if they happened to be Utameer, they were his for the breaking. The gods had forbidden the Tribes to kill outside their own after the Great Loss.

The gods held one thing sacred above all others, and as the skalds told the tale, it was because of the



Langlowlaw, creatures that fed on Power, that the gods stopped walking among them. Denying their children their presence, the comfort of their embrace, the wisdom of their words. It was a harsh lesson...

But maybe the tale was a bit more influenced by the teller than he had ever thought. Mayhap, the blame lay on both sides...or neither side at all.

Padding through the high grasses, past the horses in their corrals, and over the low fence of the backyard, he landed on grass that stayed green and lush throughout the year. Holding a strange blue tint that others had commented on more than once. But the bluest of grass was in the form of a circle with a stone slab balanced on a huge tree stump that stood waist-high in the center of it, with streaks of quartz running through the slightly rounded mass of granite.

Colored wax dripped down the sides from candles lit in sunrise vigils. An abalone shell, its insides once shining, was now coated in the ashes from incense burned in cleansing.

In all the stories, he had never heard of something like this happening. Becoming allies with the fairies, gods...it was like asking someone to stab you in the back. But he didn't have a choice right now. His kind were being killed as well as theirs.

Which meant one of two things. A powerful band of warlocks that knew about the Tribes or some of each Tribe had gone rogue, joined up together, and were killing their own.

The former seemed the most plausible. For Warlocks, those that practiced outside the grace of the gods, that had broken the sacred vow of every witch,

were creatures that had nothing to lose in taking one more life, desecrating one more altar.

But the latter, it was unheard of. Only one of the local Utameer could kill him, and to do so would be a long and desperate battle. But to have both Tribes, who had up until his alliance with their Che-awk barely tolerated each other, or not all...join together, to kill their own. The dishonor alone...

Shaking his head at the improbability of it, he made his way to the back screen door...

*"Be on guard, my brother..."*

Pausing, he felt the bullet whiz by the end of his nose, thunking solidly into the back bedrooms outer wall beneath the windowsill.

Guns?

Scenting the wind, he smelled nothing. They must be down wind. Finding a place of cover behind some old barrels, he released his senses to the earth, flowing over the ground faster than any could move, covering miles of sage scrub, wild critters, and nothingness...

Stopping, he focused on the patch of nothing that hovered across the reservoir just over the first hill. Their pulse, a bit of earth that he could recognize, but that was it. As if whatever light had once lived within this creature had been snuffed, leaving a smoldering ember in its place, slowly left to burn into pitch...nothingness.

There was one thing to say about the creature that is void of all magic. They can't tell when something of magic is about to open a can of whoop-ass on them.

Feeling his muscles tense, he leapt from behind the

barrel, the ground blurring beneath his feet as he moved, a shadow passing among the scrub and tall grasses. Around the reservoir and circling the other side, moving faster than the wind that ran at his back.

Up over the first hill, he knew this place, knew it to be sacred, blessed by the local pagans. That the ungifted one rested within the circle of dormant Power only confirmed how completely void its gifts were.

Tensing once again, he leapt upon the creature that smelled of rotting vegetation and hopelessness. Darting to the side as the silver blade of an athame slashed past his face, the metal glinting deadly in the night.

Pouncing again, he felt his body stretch mid-leap, paws becoming hands, legs extending into human feet as he touched the handle of the blade and grappled for its rowan handle.

Twisting, they both tumbled to the ground, trying to take control of the blade, as they began rolling down the hill and toward the black waters of the lake.

Pulling his shields close against his now human skin, he felt them deflect the blade, time and time again as the creature above him, below him, above him, tried to impale his heart.

Hearing the water as they drew closer, Jagur forced his will upon the void struggling beneath him, hoping that something deep within the creature would recognize it and release the blade.

With an agonizing scream, it leapt away from Jagur, turned toward the reservoir, and ran the blade, shifter-quick, across its throat.

"No!" Moving, he caught the body as it fell, the void creature's face finally revealed by the moon's silvery light beneath dirt and bruises.

Hair that had once swirled with the tree bark colors of an ancient forest lay matted against his forehead, most of it cut off next to the scalp. His jade eyes were now empty of the laughter that had once lit them, a dark gouge marring the perfection of his forehead.

They had taken his third eye, as they had Amber.

Erik...

Pulling the limp body to his chest, a howl of agony and rage ripped from his throat to roll across the hills, echoing over the dark waters. Those that had done this would die. If not by his hands, then by another's while he watched. For only when he knew that they were all truly stripped from this plain would he ever be able to wipe this last image of his pack-brother from his memory.

*Be on guard, my brother...*

He had warned him. Even after they had broken him so completely; a part that was intrinsically Erik had remained.

Standing, the limp body held tight to his chest, he walked back to the circle of Power, calling the corners as he dug a hole in the loamy soil, the earth moving at his request.

This was sacred space; his soul would find the Summer Land with its body buried in such a place. As he had come from the Earth, so did he return to it.

So mote it be.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan gazed over the Lang and the Loyal, as they gathered around him, anger in their eyes burning brighter than the dance lights that had lit the club that night.

Haven had closed early, the only explanation being a private party, and only those that walked the bottom floor were invited.

"This night, one of the Pack, their Uta, has escaped from whoever it was that had taken her and found solace with a witch of Power named Raina. As many of you know, she owns the Kestrel's Loft, and it is my hope that she will represent us in Council.

"The Uta had been stripped of her gifts, a mere shadow of the creature she once was and completely void of Power. But she also called that Power back to her once she was in Sanctuary, so there is hope for those of the Lang that are missing. If we can find them in time and take them to Raina, they can become whole and walk among us again." Softly spoken words fluttered through the room as questions of who was missing let alone who would dare to come up against the Langlolawk swept across his senses. Disbelief, outrage, but most of all vengeance throbbed across their auras in god-like fury.

Holding up his hand, silence reigned once again, before he began to form his next thoughts aloud.

"The Utameer, even from a loss of control, would not do that to their Uta. So they must be ruled out for the moment, and even for her young age, none here could do such a thing to her without one of the Elders

sensing her essence on you. So those here tonight are ruled out as well.

"That leaves only the mortals of Power, the witches or, more accurately, the warlocks that would have the strength and knowledge to do this." Sitting up straight, he touched each of the Gathering with his Power, once again laying his protection upon them. Clio came up beside him and did the same, the silver lights that now danced in his aura missed by none and commented by none. He was their Che-awk, and their loyalty was unconditional and unquestionable.

"Each of you use what is remaining of the shadows this night and search for a place that smells of rotting plants and lost hope. Where the walls are old and damp, with a floor of desecrated earth." He needed to say nothing more, for the Lang were gone with the shadows, leaving the Loyal to take a more mortal pace, or be picked up and swept into a blur by those with the blood of the pack.

"Will we find them before the sun rises?"

Nodding, he rose and touched Clio's chin gently with his thumb and index finger. "Stay here and guard the fort, my Muse." Lightly bussing her lips, he was gone when she opened her eyes, the light of all Hades burning brightly within their depths.

\* \* \* \*

A place that smells of rotting earth and decay, with damp walls on desecrated earth.

In his mind, he could see the place that his witch had described to him, and desecrated earth ruled out

many of the places it could have been: old cemeteries, burial grounds of the numerous Native Americans that had once called this their home, and sacred space made by the local pagans, which could be almost anywhere they chose.

But the Uta had called her Power back to her, and one of his stronger gifts was tracing residual Power trails through the ether.

He would find them before the dawn.

Closing his eyes, he felt his spirit break free of its not-so-mortal coil and expand in every direction at once. It was much like what one would think of the omnipresent Christian God, being everywhere at once but on a smaller scale. In truth, the gods were everywhere, for they were in everything in existence.

Shaking his non-material head at where his thoughts were straying to, he tasted the ether, picking up traces of the stronger trails first. Those of his witch were the first to be tasted, for she had been battling this night, and the residual still floated on the astral plain. Sandalwood and roses, sage and spice, they were all a part of her distinct scent.

But he was looking for one a bit muskier, younger, more innocent, a child of the other Tribe, as different as they come from the Lang...yet the same.

He saw the residual trail weaving through the ether like a fading comet's tail, sparks of Power still twinkling like stars at sunrise and fading just as quickly.

Her colors were vibrant greens and sweet, healing blues with streaks of crimson and gold...odd, that she should have the elements of fire and air in her trail...

Sorting that away for another time to ponder, he sent a Calling out to the Lang, touching each of them in turn, who then passed on the message to the Loyal, and began to follow the path of the energy backward to the place it had been taken from, not returned to.

As he moved faster than thought, the trail became weaker, but the overwhelming nothingness that began to surround him strengthened, slowing him down, dragging against him like a current as it pushed him away.

A warding spell. A simple one, but effective against a weaker creature. Clearing a path with the force of his will past the parameters of the spell, his honor unblemished for the quest that he was on was a noble one, and those that had defiled their Tribes were practicing outside the graces of the gods. So by all rules, they were fair game, by any and all means necessary to see them wiped from the face of the mortal realm.

It was no wonder those that practiced on the fringes of the gods' graces were both feared and respected, for they would do what had to be done to see their coven safe. And if that meant binding a warlock until they went insane from the nothingness of it all...all the better.

Visualizing a flame, he sent it out in all directions, quicksilver bright, destroying that last of the webbing that held him back and releasing him into the pitch blackness of a void that he had yet to see of such a magnitude.

So, this must be the place.

Leaving the ether, he glided back into the physical



realm, to see a house, no, not a house but a stone lodging of some kind. Old and decaying, and from the feel of it, more than a hundred years old. The desecrated earth came from the fact that they had built the lodge on an ancestral burial ground, and if the spirits he saw walking about in the woods as dark shadows were any indication, the recent activities had woken the spirit guardians of this place up, and they were just a bit pissed about it.

Waiting, he sensed that one of the Loyal would be the first there. The pack was amazing trackers, the Earth seemingly telling them where they needed to go and how quickest to get there. They weren't bound by Human Law and its many misconceptions, but moved as one with the Earth and Water, faster than any of the Lang could move in solid form.

Searching the lodge, he could still feel the traces of what had been there, their auras leaving marks like dots of cooling heat.

There had been at least five of them, but probably more. To many different trails here to belong to that few, but he could sense no one in the lodge itself...unless.

Layla was the first one there, never ceasing to amaze him in the fact that she had kept what she was hidden from him for almost their first five years together, so long ago...

Shaking his head, his spirit moved over to her, touching her shields softly, smiling as her lips bent, her head turning in his direction as her eyes unnervingly found his own.

She had the Sight, one who could see as clearly the

things on the astral as most could in the physical. Nodding to him, he watched as she scanned the trees, noting the shadows that drifted about them. Her brow furrowing in thought as she watched the ancient guardians, then nodded to each as she had him.

Spirits weren't often surprised. To have something still connected to its mortal coil recognize their existence, well, lets just say they became extremely curious. He'd had to, on more than one occasion, asked them to give him at least a few hours alone for trance after they had followed her home. A sort of ghost puppy love, if you would.

Knowing he would be setting up wards again when they got home, he waited until another of the Loyal, and then two of the Lang arrived before he went back to his body and slipped into the shadows, following their Power into the mountains to the east, well inside the Cleveland National Forest.

The few minutes it took him to weave within the shadows and cover the sixty or so miles gave the rest of the Loyal and most of the Lang ample time to get there.

The surprise came when he noted a number of unfamiliar faces, all of which, from their auras, belonged to the Utameer.

Walking over to Layla, he swept his fingertips across her cheek, accepted the light kiss she brushed against his knuckles, and let her guide him to what he needed to see.

Surprisingly, she brought him to a witch that walked between both Tribes with a brazen immunity

that they had to respect. He had not seen for some time, her five-foot-tall frame making her stand out among so many over six foot. Her aura was brighter, her Power sweeter, and her Gifts stronger than most...

"Morgan." Turning, her ankle-length red hair swirled about her body with a life of its own. The faint jingle of bells and coins rolled across his senses as they brushed against one another on her belt and ankles. They reminded him of the first time he'd seen her, belly dancing before a bonfire, playing with the blaze as she mesmerized the drummers to her will. Green eyes burning with mischief and the promise of so much more...he had been entranced as had every man there, mortal or no.

"Aidan...." Low and sultry, she wiggled her nose at him, 'Samantha' style, as she smiled, taking the few steps needed to move into his embrace. Lightly, she nipped him on the neck as he bent over her small frame and picked her up to hold her against him.

"And what have you gotten into now that I find you here?" Shrugging her shoulders, she batted her lashes at him innocently, before finally giving up the southern belle routine, and pointing to the ground.

"Down, Aidan, you know how I hate being picked up. Though I am honored with your touch."

Aidan nipped her lower lip in a small attempt to remind her to respect what he was...and as usual, failed.

Placing Morgan back on the ground, she leaned over and picked up what appeared to be a piece of charcoal and handed it to him.

"Someone hasn't been playing nice, Aidan..."

Aidan brought the charcoal to his nose and took in the last lingering scent of wormwood and valerian. "No, they're not, Morgan. And I take it that you're not going to answer my question?"

Nodding, she turned away from him to gaze at the crumbling lodge once again, her shields held tightly to her as she swayed slightly from side to side.

Sensing the building Power, he saw her aura change from a swirling mass of colors to a misty silver that drowned out all other color. She was an Avatar, a mortal that had the gift of the Divine. It drove most mad, before they ever learned how to control this tapping into the Other's Power. But then again, Morgan had never been exactly sane to start with.

"Some of the Gathering are still alive, but they've taken them into the Nothingness... when the Uta drained one of their leaders, they knew we would come here, a huge fire...heading west, must take back what was stolen, or all will be for naught..."

All eyes had turned to Morgan with the first faint syllable, recognizing she was one with the gods, knowing what They knew, seeing all that was, but putting words to the chaos was always draining, and half the time vague or completely senseless.

Knowing what would come when she came back to her body, Aidan stepped up behind and caught her as she began to crumble. Noting that the sky to the east was beginning to lighten with hints of red and pink, he knew they would not be able to travel much longer with the shadows. The search would have to wait

until dark for the Lang, but the Utameer could do so until they joined them again at dusk.

"You heard the Witch, we head west." Calling an Elder with ice blond hair to his side with a glance, he transferred Morgan gently into his arms and brushed his mind at the same time.

*"Be easy with this one, Liam; we still need her..."*

"Of course, Aidan, if you'll recall our history together. If I were going to harm the Avatar, I would have done so years ago." Aidan's stormy eyes met with Liam's mica in a silent understanding.

"Just before you met Amber..." Aidan noted the dampening of Liam's aura for a single heartbeat and wondered how deeply the one worshipped by some as Thanatos had cared for an Uta.

"Be at ease, Aidan." Liam began, his black eyes roaming over Morgan's hour-glass form as he shifted her still-unconscious body in his arms. "As Morgan once protected me, so shall I return the favor."

"No...not you...lying bastard..." Morgan's disjointed words whispered between both Lang as Aidan's golden brow rose in question.

"It's a long story, Aidan, one that I do not wish to go into here."

Nodding that he understood, Aidan brushed Morgan's cheek with the back of his knuckles, marking her with his Power, his protection, before turning to Layla as she waited silently at his side.

"Layla, find our kin."

Layla's almond eyes met his with a blaze matching the chaos in his heart. If she did not find them before the dawn, she would find them before the moon

rising.

No one hurt the Gathering.

With a blur of motion, she was off, the rest of the Utameer following her, their howls filling the quiet of the forest with an eerie reckoning of what was to come.

\* \* \* \*

Layla moved at the head of the pack, the world around her a blur of colors as they moved faster than the human eye could follow, looking like a cloud's shadow rolling across the landscape.

She was an Elder among them, even if the Lang did claim her loyalty.

She could sense the many questions that rolled through their minds as they followed her. Their instinctive trust in one that was not loyal to their Tribe or even of their Tuk-cha was more of a surprise to Layla than she ever would have let them know.

She had seen the uneasy truce between the two Tribes when the Lang had given them Janel. But, from what she had heard of the last meeting between the two Tribes at the witch's home, it was a good thing that she had not been there.

For the one called Loren would now be dead if she had.

Layla came into her Power just a month before she had been attacked, so long ago, that the memory felt more like a dream than a truth. A full moon had called her out into the night, once again seeking something that she did not understand.

And during the ninth century, after the death of one of the most famous Healers in human history, a woman did not roam the streets of Constantinople alone at night for good reason. No one did.

But she had been taken with madness, the walls closing in on her as she lay in her bed, panting as she tried to ease the pressure from her chest.

She had climbed out her window and up onto the roof, reveling in the vastness of the night sky...when he had come to her, jumping across the rooftops with the ease of a child's sigh.

He was her Na-meer, the one that was teaching her the ways of the tribe, but she would not leave her mortal family, not yet.

Then the others had come, the ones she now knew were called Warlocks, Oathbreakers. They had been watching her dwelling, waiting to spring the trap.

Because she would not leave her first family, she had lost her mate of the second. And it was while she was fighting the last three of the dark Practitioners in an alley not far from her home, that He had come.

They had drained her, psychic leeches of the worst sort, and were toying with her before they killed her. An newly Awakened Uta, drained of Power, was seemingly no threat to them

The gods had answered her prayers in the form of a Langlolawk. Creatures she had been told were Power-hungry predators that would never help an Utameer. She sensed what he was, knowing on an instinctive level, Tribe recognizing Tribe.

But he had only seen a mortal girl struggling for her life because she was so drained.

Like Shiva, he rained down death upon them. Offering her aid with those same hands that were covered with her enemies' blood.

And she knew, then, that this is where the gods had wanted her to be. For if her beloved had not died that night, she would have lived forever within the tribes of the desert he spoke of.

At the time, she did not know how this Lang and the others of his kind would react to an Uta among them, so she hid what she was. The strongest of her Gifts was being able to cloak them. Even the Elders of the Lang had not recognized what she truly was.

She still laughed at the stunned look she remembered on their faces when she saved all their magical hides a few years later, revealing what she was in order to save the ones she had grown to love as Lelayo, the ancient word for the Gathering among the Lang.

Odd, how two tribes that had been enemies since the creation of their kind would create two different words that meant the same thing.

Tuk-cha. Lelayo. When it came down to it, Pack or Clan, Family or Gathering, whatever the word they used at the time; they all meant Home.

Shaking her head lightly to clear it of her musings, she noted that the others had moved up to run beside her in their different forms of wolf, puma, bear, horse, tiger, gazelle. She had not taken her totem form in centuries, but suddenly the need to do so welled up in her throat like a tearful homecoming.

The dawn was tinting the eastern sky beyond the mountains with a rosy glow, while they ran for the



west and the shadows that hid their enemies.

She could track them in her sleep. The trail of fear and anger they had left was fading quickly, but not fast enough to save them.

Not from her.

Slowing as they reached the edge of El Cajon, the first major city in their path between the mountains and the ocean, she watched as the trail scattered among those that lived there.

She had never liked the valley. It collected all the smog that was blown in from the coast to hang over the city like a sick haze.

Stopping, she closed her eyes as the others shifted around her, taking their human forms in an unwritten law of survival.

Odd, how those that were charged with being Guardians of the Second Children had to guard knowledge of their existence from those they watched over. There had been a time when things had been different. But that time was not now.

The Native American cultures that had accepted them as shamans and prophets had all but forgotten them. Sweet Medicine. White Buffalo Woman...

Shaking off the darkening thoughts, she turned and froze.

Eyes slitting and a low growl was the only warning she gave before she leapt over the heads of those that had been following her to the creature with the platinum hair that smelled of Dishonor.

Blue-green eyes looked up to see a dark blur crash into her, knocking her to the ground.

\* \* \* \*

Loren knew that she would pay karma for trying to attack the Lang's Che-awk with an athame. But she had never expected it to come from an Uta that made Jagur look like a newborn in Power.

They both tumbled through the high golden grasses, one of Layla's hands around her throat while her other held Loren's wrist away from the blade she had been reaching for on her calf.

Loren's other hand was preoccupied with holding back two fingers around her throat, so that her windpipe would not be crushed by the force in the almond-eyed Uta's grip.

Sky. Earth. Sky. Earth. They rolled out of the grasses and over a dirt road to stop against something solid...that was wearing boots the French Sun King would have envied.

Aidan...

A harsh breath and then a loud snapping echoed through the hills of this deserted valley as the dark-eyed Uta broke her wrist, grabbed Loren's blade from her calf and stabbed at her, all in a single heartbeat. The blade penetrated the skin above her left breast no more than a centimeter before the hand holding the blade was stopped.

"You can't kill her, Layla; she's Guardian to my witch and now owes you her loyalty for sparing her. Leave it at this." And as if Layla were more Lang than Utameer, she shifted her eyes to her Che-awk and vanished.

"Gods, is she fast..." Aidan extended his hand.

Loren knew she had to take it or cause insult to the leader of the one she was now bound to serve until the next meeting of the Council, and the pack's Drottin championed her in a fight for her release.

Aidan pulled her up by her good hand, then held her briefly against his body as he mingled his Power with hers, marking her as one under his protection.

Loren felt what he was doing, and a part of her wanted to rebel at the thought of being bound to someone of his clan. But at least Layla was an Uta and not a blood-sucking Lang. Even if for some reason she was loyal to them.

Aidan held her broken wrist gently, palm to the sky, as a breeze began to blow lightly over her flesh. Power flared, and then an intense heat surrounded her wrist, quickly painful, and then gone altogether. Loren's broken wrist healed with just the slightest pink tint to her skin.

"You are bound to serve Layla until your Drottin wins your cause at Council or thirteen moons pass in the sky. Do not make me regret the sparing of your life, Loren of the Utameer."

It was a warning, clear as day, and she had expected no less. This was the karma she would pay for her act of dishonor. In that light, it was an easy debt the gods had given her to fulfill...But...

"You'll not feed from me, Aidan, nor will any of your kind. I will not be bound to the Lang for all eternity." Loren felt his Power flare up around him, shields dropping, aura expanding, until she was placing her hands over her face to block out the brilliance of the light that surrounded him.

"You will do as Layla tells you. Whether that is to be a whore to the Loyal or a plaything to the Lang. You called this down upon yourself, Loren." Reigning in his Power, his shields once again firmly in place, he removed her hands from her face, noting the slight misting in her eyes. She had broken a Law set down by the gods; she could not go unpunished for her actions.

"And if one night I come, wishing to bathe in your Power as I taste your essence, then you will welcome me with open arms, or broken arms. The choice...as always...will be yours." Leaning forward, he brushed his lips lightly across the juncture of her neck and shoulders, above the wildly beating pulse point.

"I hate you, Aidan. I will always..."

"Turn that anger on the one responsible for you being here. Don't dishonor yourself further by blaming anyone for the state of your life...other than yourself," he whispered against her flesh, his lips brushing her dust-covered skin as he soaked in her fear.

\* \* \* \*

Whether by pleasure or pain, she would feed those of the Lang. Lust, fear, agony...they all tasted just as sweet rolling across a Lang's tongue.

Lifting his head, they both turned to the mountains in the east.

They could all hear it. The song of the Dawn, sweeping over the hills with the first rays of light. It was said to be one of the two melodies that had

brought about all Creation. For the gods could not help but dance for the beauty that they had created, and within that Spiral Dance...Life.

Searching the hills around them, he sensed none of the Lang remained, all knowing they would lose the shadows soon and preferring not to expend the energy of moving as the Shifters did. They did not draw Power from the Earth and Water as the Utameer did, and could no longer draw from flame or storm...and it seemed a bit too uncontrolled for their liking.

Well, he needed to burn away some of this dark mood. If running like a Shifter didn't do it, nothing would.

\* \* \* \*

Layla left Aidan with the foolish Uta. She had heard Morgan's words, there were some of the Tribes still living...and she was going to find them.

Circling El Cajon, she opened her senses as she moved, shifter-quick across the near-empty freeways. There was only four ways out of the valley, and they had taken one of them into it. If they were indeed heading west, then the I-8 was one option, and Jamacha Road was the other.

Trusting her instincts, she passed over the I-8 and headed for the two-lane road that passed by the Sweetwater Reservoir.

They couldn't be moving fast with obviously abused 'humans' in their vehicles. If they were pulled over, there would be no way to explain...

*Help me...sweet Lady, please, someone hear me...*

Layla's heart skipped a beat as the unfamiliar and decidedly weak voice drifted through her mind.

He wasn't Lang, of that much she was certain...yet his voice rolled through her with a sense of the familiar so strong, that she would swear he was.

*Please, someone...gods, need to move, get help...*

Layla felt her mind reach for his for a split second before she pulled back. She had sworn that until she found her soul-mate, and begged his forgiveness for his death all those centuries ago that she would not speak...he had so loved her voice...

Moving over the empty road by the man-made lake, she jumped over the barbwire fence and headed for the stranger.

She did not have time for this...Lang could be dying even now, and here she was, running through damn prickly cactus...to help a human with an unconscious Gift for Telepathy.

He was in a ditch about fifty yards from the road. Water lapped knee deep against his Fish and Game uniform as he struggled to pull himself up the muddy sides of the ditch with a broken arm and a bloody side.

Dark gold skin and raven black hair were covered in mud as he slid against the slippery surface. His square jaw had blue and purple bruises she could see under all that mud, and his thick black eyelashes were matted with the gunk.

Solid, muscular arms flexed beneath the tan short-sleeve uniform as equally muscular legs beneath the brown shorts helped push his body up higher against

the wall.

An un-Awakened Utameer had called her?

He must have sensed her presence, for he looked up at her, and Layla found herself gazing into the lightest blue eyes...that went from agony to hope as they met her date-brown gaze.

"Please, help me...Warlocks with hurt people...that don't feel like people..."

As the sound of his voice rolled over her senses, it felt like her stomach fell into her feet as the breath caught in her throat.

And every cell in her being screamed at her to protect him...

Pulling out her cell-phone from her back pocket, she checked to see if it was still working, before text messaging a note to Aidan to tell the other Utameer that the Warlocks had taken a dirt access road southwest into Bonita...and that she would be bringing home a guest.

Nodding her head, she jumped down into the knee deep water, lifted him carefully over her shoulder, and sprang with ease up and over the wall of mud.

"What the..."

"Sshhhhhh." She whispered as she silently cast a spell of Easing, and felt the pain slide out of him as he went slack against her shoulder.

Moving with a speed that no other Utameer could match, she crossed over the quiet dirt roads, past fields with horses, and down the back streets to Harbor Drive. Then it was just a hop, skip, and a jump to the Convention Center, and her residence with Aidan across the street.

Entering through the private garage, she took the suite's elevator to her home away from Haven.

Twenty-five miles in under three minutes...not bad.

Punching in her code, the elevator rose silently to the thirtieth floor penthouse, opening into the foyer the size of some small homes. Shifting his body from her shoulder to her chest, she walked silently through the foyer, living room, and down the hall into her private rooms.

Opening the door with a thought, she moved through the solar, her personal living room, and into her bedroom.

Her personal sanctuary was a mismatch of things collected through the centuries with Aidan. Rugs from Persia, tapestries from Europe, furniture from the Far East, and the bed, from the Court of His Royal Majesty Louis...better known as the Sun King.

It was gold leaf upon pure gold painted wood with gold embellishments and gold silk and velvet sheets...gaudy as all Hades, but she had spent ten years in the bed while on his Court, and His Majesty had given it to her when she and Aidan had left.

Ah, Louis, what a great King...she had to call him and see how he was doing in Tahiti.

Pausing for a moment, she scanned the room to make sure anything of the Tribes was securely locked away, before making a right turn, and heading into her bathing room.

Think 'Roman Bath House'...

Setting her mortal down carefully on the mosaic-covered floor, she checked the temperature of the



rectangular, sunken bath. Roughly one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Perfect.

Turning on her knees back to her be-spelled guest, she stripped off his brown shorts and tan button-up shirt, taking a moment to appreciate his delicious form with her gaze.

Goddess, he really was divine, bearing a striking resemblance to that Arabic hottie from 'The Mummy'...they just didn't make many men like this anymore...except this one's hair was much too short, only brushing against his jaw in blue-black waves.

Well, hair could grow, once he was Awakened, at a rapid pace.

Sliding her hands into the waistband of his boxer-briefs, she slid them down his sparsely haired, toned legs, and tossed them in the pile with the rest of his soiled clothing.

Without the shirt covering him, she now had a good look at the wound in his side. With the clean sweep of the cut, it was done with an extremely sharp blade...but not an athame.

His forearm was broken, the break a clean one from what she was sensing, and easy enough to fix.

With centuries of practice, she slipped out of her leather cloths with ease, then picked him up once again, and stepped down into the sunken bath.

Water was their Element. And healing in water, was almost as natural as breathing, even to an unconscious Utameer.

Finding the ledge, she sat down with the sleeping one held in front of her, his back to her chest, his head resting on her shoulder, while she began to push

Power into him to Awaken him and start the healing.

Power, sweet as honey, rolled off her skin and sank into his sleeping form. One of Layla's arms held him to her about his waist, while her other arm reached for the organic soap by the rim, and began to wash him.

First, his shoulders, then his uninjured arm, then his neck. She lost track of time as what began as a cleansing ritual, turned into something of a more personal venture.

Wrapping her legs around his waist to hold him to her, she began to explore and caress him with both hands, checking to make sure that, indeed, his side wound had closed and his arm was set and healing. As steam from the water rose around them, she felt her body begin to pulse with desire, her hips rubbed her clit against his back of their own volition, strengthening the throbbing in her core.

Rinsing off the soap from his skin, she gave into the notion to taste him, and let her lips fall to his warm golden shoulder. Moved her tongue past moist lips to lick the firm flesh, then lightly test its resiliency with her teeth.

Power flared from his form as the first step of the Awakening was completed, returning to her a fraction of what she had given him. Rolling across her senses with his essence, sinking his very self deep into her pores.

"What the...am I dreaming?" Soft, silent laughter vibrated against his back as he became aware of the long, toned legs that were wrapped around his waist, and their red-painted toes.

Turning his head to see if it was the woman he recalled rescuing him that was pressed up against his back with all that bare flesh, he was both surprised, and oddly comforted to find it was.

"You weren't a dream."

Shaking her head, she let him move to face her within the circle of her legs.

Gods, not only wasn't she a dream...she had to be the most striking creature he had ever seen...and she was completely nude.

As soon as her bare skin beneath the water registered in his still slightly be-spelled brain, Laith felt himself harden. The slightly milky water between them not hiding the fact, and from the look in her date-colored eyes, she didn't seem to mind.

"Who are you?" Touching her throat, she shook her head while touching her lips with her other hand. "You can't speak?"

Nodding, Layla looked around the room for something to write on, but was surrounded by white marble, gorgeous man...and mud-covered cloths.

Pressing at his chest lightly, she waited for him to get the hint and move back. Rising from the ledge, the water lapped around her shoulders as she moved to the clothes by the rim, and took a gob of lake-mud in her finger. Motioning him over with a hand, she spelled out her name on the white part of the marble mosaic floor.

"Layla? You're name is Layla." At her affirmative nod, she smiled...and he was once again stunned by her beauty.

Layla touched his chest with her fingertip, and

raised an arched eyebrow in silent inquiry.

"Oh, I'm Laith."

Laith...Arabic for 'lion'...it would be interesting to see if that would be his chosen form...a perfect companion to her lioness...

Laith watched as something, curious, yet arousing passed through her gaze before she removed the space between them, high, firm breasts pushing against his chest as her lips found and nipped his jaw.

Layla felt his arousal, strong and smooth against her belly, and could only think of one place she would rather have him. It had been at least a century since a Lang had shared Power with her, thrusting into her body, as his teeth sank into her neck. There were very few, male or female, that she allowed to touch her, even in passing, and fewer still that she felt compelled to.

"Whoa, Layla..." But his words were cut short as he felt her legs wrap around his waist, and her lips cover his. Lust rolled down his spine as her hand wrapped around the base of his shaft beneath the water, and positioned him against her hot core.

Layla didn't know why he was different, why she wanted him. Now. All she did know was that he had to be inside of her, deep and hard, thrusting within her, filling her.

\* \* \* \*

Laith pulled away from her kiss to find her almond eyes and the desperate hunger that burned within them...and was lost.

Thrusting, he only entered her a couple inches. Gods, she was tight! Moaning in frustration, he felt her relax her vaginal muscles and he slipped in a few more. Wrapping her arms around his neck, he found her lips, her tongue, as his hands took her upper thighs and shifted the angle as he pushed within her. Gaining a few more hot, slick inches, he nipped her lower lip as he withdrew, catching Layla's moan of protest within his mouth.

Laith's hands slid to her firm, rounded ass, and pulled her against him as he thrust into her with his hips...almost there...

\* \* \* \*

Goddess, he was so thick, stretching the walls of her yoni with each penetrating thrust. It was pain mixed with pleasure as her body adjusted to his size while he rubbed against her sensitive inner walls. Nails digging into his shoulders, she moaned as he withdrew from her, only to feel him fill her impossibly full with his flesh, touching her womb.

Another thrust, and his cock was completely surrounded by tight, trembling flesh. His balls bobbed against her ass in the water while her nails dug into his shoulders. Biting her lip, a growl, low in his throat escaped him as he withdrew, and impaled her completely once again, each time, her tight flesh easing around him. Making it easier for him to slide into her depths.

Layla heard the growl, and responded in kind. Her white teeth finding his neck and biting down as the

sound of her growl echoed off the marble walls.

"Gods, Layla, I could..." Laith's words were cut off by a moan as Layla tightened her kegel muscles around him, squeezing him almost out of her before she stopped.

Turning, he pushed her against the side of the tub, placed his knees on the ledge beneath the water, and quickly thrust into her. Her gasp of surprise was followed by a groan of pleasure as he began to thrust and retreat rapidly within her. Surging into her, her breasts rubbed against his hairless chest as his tongue made shallow thrusts past her lips, playing with her tongue.

Leaving her lips, he nipped, licked and kissed his way across her jaw, over her ear, and down her neck to her shoulder...but it wasn't enough...he wanted something else.

Laith pulled completely out of her and lifted her partially out of the sunken bath, pressing her breasts and hips down on the cool marble floor, while leaving her legs in the water. Parting her legs, he found her core, and sank into her once again, wrenching a moan of pleasure from their lips as he sank to the hilt.

Covering her body with his chest, he found the back of her neck and firmly bit down as he continued to thrust...

It was the act of a life-mate, and he did it instinctively.

Pushing her hips against him as he thrust, Layla felt her core spasm as she began to orgasm, taking him over the edge with her.

His roar of release echoing through the room, and

## TWILIGHT CALLING

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in her memories...

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**R**aina woke with the coming of dawn and someone pounding on the door downstairs, making the bells clang with the vibration.

Gods....

Sliding from the bed, she went over to the window, pushed it open, and looked down.

Detective Warren stood there, his dark auburn hair glinting with red highlights in the early morning light. And if she remembered correctly, those were the same clothes he had been wearing yesterday, her mother's book clutched securely to his chest.

"Detective, we don't open for a good hour yet." Frantic blue eyes looked up at her from a face pale from a lack of sleep. The Healer in her woke with a resounding clang, and she sighed.

"One moment, I'll be down to let you in." Oh gods, she'd left the bloody clothes in the sink downstairs, the whole room probably smelled like it!

No, Mickey had brought them up...and hopefully cleaned up the hallway...

Freaking wonderful.

Quickly searching through her closet, she grabbed



a pair of gray hip-hugger jeans and a violet, ribbed V-neck half-top that she'd folded but had yet to hang after the wash and slipped into them. Opening her door, she'd passed the living room that was now empty before she remembered her shoes, thought to hell with it, and jogged across the patio and down the back stairs barefoot.

When she got to the front door, he was waiting for her. His eyes had calmed down a bit, but the sense that he was standing on the brink stayed with her until she opened the door and let him in, closing it behind him.

"Detective Warren, how can I help you?" She noted that his eyes went from her face to her chest, to her bare midriff, then quickly back to her face again.

Looking down, she noted that she'd forgotten a bra as well, and her nipples were easily defined from the cool morning beneath the top.

Well, it happens.

"Ms. Lightfoot...Raina...I've been reading this book all night, since I left here last night...and I want to say I'm sorry for thinking the things I did when I came here yesterday..."

Holding up her hand, she walked over to the counter, quickly glancing at the sink and finding it cleaned and empty, before moving around the counter and pulling out some leftover bread and cream cheese from the little fridge.

"Come, have a seat and something to eat, Detective..."

"Daniel."

Nodding her head that she'd heard, she came over

with the food and two glasses of iced tea.

"Daniel, then. Now, Daniel, tell me what has you coming over here at O'Dark Stupid in the morning?"

He quickly sipped his tea, his movements jerky, until the clover honey in the tea began to ease him into a less frantic mood. "I got a call from the Coroner's. There have been a number of bodies found recently with similar tattoos to the ones on Amber. We made a positive ID, by the way. This morning, her mother said she had last spoken to her on the phone about a month ago."

"Hmmm, the last time I can recall her in here had to be over a week ago, maybe two. She'd come and go a month here, a week there, so I didn't really take note of it." Nodding, he took a bite of the sourdough bread and scribbled something down on his pad of paper he seemed to always have.

"You haven't been over to Haven yet, have you." The certainty in her voice had him raising an eyebrow with a 'how do you know' look.

"I know the owner, and when I saw him last night, he hadn't mentioned that you had stopped by."

"You told him about the case when..."

"I told him what I knew because she was one of his friends and he needed to know what happened. He's not one to go to the press; he'll keep quiet. But you wouldn't get any help from him if I hadn't told him what was going on."

"Do you know who killed her, Raina?" The Detective was back again. It really pissed her off for some reason she didn't want to look into. "I told you yesterday I didn't, but I think I might know why

they're killing people. It's to take their Power." If she had told him that yesterday, she would have expected him to cart her off to the nearest Sanitarium. Now, he just hung his head. Since reading that book, he knew what she meant when she said Power, and in that book, her mother described ways of binding it from doing others harm, if not taking it outright.

"So who would do something like that?"

Shaking her head, as to that, she had no idea. She didn't associate with Oathbreakers, or Warlocks, as others called those that had gone against their only Law, and used magic for darker purposes.

"I don't know any particulars to that, Daniel. Their kind doesn't come in here; they know they're not welcome. Those that have broken the Oath to the Goddess are anathema here and, by some, still hunted down and bound as those thought to be witches were killed in the Dark Years." Nodding, his head slowly slipped to one side, then jerked up quickly.

"Daniel, you are exhausted; you need to get some sleep." Raina watched as he got up, walked past her into the Library and didn't come out.

Piquing her curiosity, she waited a few minutes, then went to the doorway and looked in to find him sprawled in her favorite chair in the corner, her mother's book held securely to his chest as he lightly snored. Well, you couldn't get much safer than the Loft if you needed to pass out somewhere.

Now another issue...was she going to tell him that if she touched the body, she could track it back to where it had felt such strong emotions as to contact her from the other side?

Magic leaves a residue of sorts, like a scent that some could follow back to its caster. Sheila had been too guarded last night to try it, but maybe today, after she had slept some...

Gods, was she still even in the Loft? Last night was what she would call vague at best. She could remember the time before Jagur got there with perfect clarity, but after that, it got hazy, like some fantastic dream.

Did Aidan put her in a bath? Did she pull Jagur to her while Aidan kissed her neck?

Gods, and after that...Nothing.

Lady of Light, what had she done?

Moaning, she let her head drop down as numerous possible scenarios flashed past her eyes.

"Enjoy yourself a bit much last night, Rainfall?"

Jerking her head toward the front door, she squinted in pain as her neck muscles protested against the quick motion. "Gods, Aidan, don't you ever knock?" Why in Loki's Laughter hadn't he set off her wards when he passed through the door?

He stood leaning against the counter, his sangria doublet a bit wrinkled and spattered with some kind of dark stain.

His thigh-high boots had definitely seen better days, especially since last night. And if she flared out her senses, she knew she would feel the warm thrumming of Power well used.

And she would swear he looked a bit more on the pale side than his normal tan self.

It was then that she caught it. The near exhaustion that hovered around him like a gray cloak, making his

movements slow and sloppy, his skin pale and drawn.

"Gods, Aidan, what did you get into last night?" Hurrying over to him, she helped him ease onto the bar stool behind him and put a finger to his wrist to check his pulse.

Slow. So damn slow.

His dark chuckle had her raising an eyebrow as she felt his body unconsciously beginning to drain her shields where she touched his wrist, the pull gaining in strength the longer she touched him. Releasing his wrist, she heard him mumble in protest as he leaned toward her, a cold man seeking the warmth of her Power.

"Aidan, I need to get you up to my room. I have more than enough charged crystals for you to drain."

Aidan shook his head. Raina stood absolutely still as he finally leaned close enough to run his lips along the edge of her V-neck, across her chest.

"I know a more enjoyable way..."

Raina felt her breath catch at the touch of his lips on her skin. Drained or not, this man still made her throb in all the right places...gods, what was she thinking?

Stepping back, eyebrow raised and Healer firmly in place, she crooked a finger at him, turned, and headed for her bedroom.

Walking quickly through the Library and down the hall, she felt a bit like a Greek myth as she tried to hear his footsteps following behind her. Refusing to turn around, she hurried up the steps, out the purple door, across the tiled rooftop patio, and into her

apartment.

Leaving the door open, she flung out her senses and felt both Balder and Sheila sleeping in the guest bedroom, their energies mixing, becoming one in sleep as only lovers well loved do.

Well, she wished them bright blessings, and hopefully, whatever half-mad cupid that was following her around wouldn't spot them.

Down the hallway and into her room, she only let herself turn around when she'd made it to the window and could see Daniel's standard issue POS Ford parked below on the street.

"Now will you stop running, or should I chase you around the room as well?" Aidan was lying on his side on top of her rumpled covers. There was something dark and aching about him lying there, clothes rumpled and sheets scattered.

"Aidan, my first offer stands. The crystals are on the shelf in the bathroom." Leaning forward, he slid onto his stomach, his gaze devouring her as he stretched cat-like, eyes finally leaving hers as they roamed over her sable hair falling free to her waist and the form-fitting violet V-neck, and stayed there. What was so interesting about...?

Hades, she still wasn't wearing a blessed bra...

"And what about the offer you made last night?" At the shocked look she gave him, he let out a dark chuckle and sighed, his eyes returning to her face.

But she was sure he saw her nipples tighten with the heated look in his sapphire gaze.

"Don't look at me like that, Raina. I didn't take advantage of you while you slept...as tempting as it

was." Sighing, he broke eye contact as he rolled onto his back and stared into the ivory canopy.

Shaken at the disappointment that flooded through her when she lost his gaze, she knew that it meant he had given in to her request, and some earthy part of her had wished that he hadn't.

Pulling her Power around her like a protective cloak, she walked into the bathroom, picked up two palm-sized pieces of rough red amber, and returned to stand beside the bed.

Letting a small smile slip, she cocked her head to one side as she watched his chest rise and fall in sleep. Why was it that men always looked so damned innocent when they slept? Placing one piece near his feet and the other close to the top of his head, she briefly touched his velvety doublet and released a small sigh.

If only he wasn't so damn beautiful...she might have been able to trust him enough to fall, and fall hard.

Carefully moving a long length of leonine hair from against his cheek, she set it behind his ear and shook her head at how pathetic she was.

Eyeing the thigh-high boots and thick doublet, she told herself firmly that she was simply saving her white comforter, and going to make him more comfortable as she rolled the boots down his muscular legs, the skintight velvet encasing his legs leaving nothing to the imagination.

Removing one boot, then the other, she dropped them quietly by the bed...gods, it had been way to long. She felt like some kind of voyeur crossed with a

dockside harlot.

Taking a deep breath, she worked the doublet open until she could see the sheer cotton shirt beneath and the darker areoles of his nipples against the fabric...

It was still early; she didn't need to get up for another fifteen or so minutes. She could just lie down...Nope.

Shaking her head at her wayward libido, she gave her body a little shake, and tiptoed across the room. It only took her a minute to find her lilac cotton bra and matching panties from the armoire. She went into the bathroom and added the few necessary garments she had forgotten in her rush to get downstairs while half asleep.

Opening the door, she checked to make sure he was sleeping soundly, noted that he'd already drained the two hunks of amber, and went back into the bathroom to get out her moonstone and lavender jade.

Jade held a piece of the wearer, and this one was a silver dragon wrapped around a large egg-shaped chunk of purple jade that usually hung from a long cord to rest over her heart chakra. She'd worn it for five years, had just recently taken it off the night before Beltane to let it 'breathe'. This would be as good a time as any to empty it out so she could start storing energy in it again.

Stepping silently over to the bed, she removed the two hunks of red amber and placed them on her pillow, then turned to find eyes the light blue of a spring dawn staring up at her.

"Hey, Aidan, you okay?" It was the vague, kind of



lost look in his eyes that let her know that he truly wasn't seeing her but someone or something else.

"We had to return her to her family, my little love, even if it caused my friend pain." Placing the moonstone at his feet and sitting lightly on the edge of the bed near his hip, she ran a slightly shaking hand through his golden hair at the temples, stopping at his jaw to rub the still-smooth cheek with her thumb.

"Of course you did." Taking one of his unresisting hands, she placed the jade in his palm and wrapped his fingers around it.

When she looked up at his face, his eyes were once again closed, his breathing shallow but regular.

*"Reve sucre, ma leone." Sweet dreams, my lion...*

French. Gods, she hadn't thought something in French in years, let alone said it aloud. Why would it start coming back to her now?

*"Because it is the language of Love..."*

The bad Pepe le Pew accent could only belong to one Construct...

*"Gods, Luis, put a sock in it..."*

She felt him drop his chin on her shoulder as he looked down at their sleeping guest, her shoulder warming with his other-planar touch.

*"Not Bad for one of his Kind...just not Good..."* Luis murmured.

*"And what exactly do you mean by that?"*

But he was gone; off to flipping old men's fake hair off their balding pates or hiding someone's dentures, no doubt.

She could call him back to her, and he would come,

but she already knew that he'd say nothing more about that vague comment.

It was just his way.

Raina shook her head at the odd little quirks in her character that were so dominant in his...

Slowly, she stood up, took one more look at the seemingly innocent if not oddly dressed man sleeping on her rumpled, white flannel sheets, and headed out the door. Closing it quietly behind her, and moved down the hall.

"Raina?" Stopping at the guest bedroom's door, she tried to keep the grin from her voice when she replied to Balder's question.

"One and only, Balder. If you're hungry, I have a fridge well stocked, and there are leftovers downstairs if you want to socialize sometime in the next half-hour or so before the Loft opens." The bed creaked, and then muffled footsteps crossed the room before the door partially opened, and Balder's huge bare chest met her gaze. Looking quickly up, she couldn't hide the grin, but then again, it seemed he couldn't either.

Grinning like a loon, he tweaked her chin before bussing a kiss on her forehead.

"Thank you, Raina."

Nodding, she punched him lightly in the chest. "Anytime, Romeo."

Chuckling, he blew her a kiss before closing the door and from the sounds of the bed creaking in protest, jumped on whoever had been in it.

*Give you three guesses.*

Shaking her head, she made her way back

downstairs and into the kitchen, just as a groggy-eyed Loren walked in through the back gate and gave her a feeble wave.

"Hmm, looks like you and Aidan went to the same party last night." At the mention of his name, she saw Loren stiffen as if to protest any socializing with the man she seemed to detest...then just shook her head and sighed.

"Something like that, Rainbow."

Interesting...

"Well then, since you guys are such bosom buddies now, I'll send you up with a tray for him later so you can chat..." The dark look that Loren sent to the ceiling had her silently hooting in laughter.

"Then again, maybe not."

Loren stopped, her mouth opening to say something then closing again, and walked toward the front room. She needed to make sure everything was spick and span...and cleaning had always helped her unwind, work things out in her head while she kept her hands busy, but...

Stopping, she just stared for a moment at the mortal sleeping in Raina's favorite chair before turning and heading back into the kitchen. "Who's the suit in the Library?" Raina stopped stirring the large bowl of chocolate chip cookie dough that had been chilling in the large refrigerator from the night before and looked up, magic hovering on the chips as it waited patiently for her to finish constructing the intent of the spell.

"Detective Warren of the SDPD." Loren raised one platinum eyebrow at that and waited silently for

Raina to continue.

"He's looking for the people that killed Amber. And I told him I'd assist him as best I could."

"By letting him sleep in your favorite chair?"

Giving Loren a 'don't be a dense blond' look, Raina finished the casting and started scooping the dough onto the waiting tray. "By interpreting in a fashion the runes on Amber's arm, and who I thought could be behind it and why. Though I don't know how much I've helped in that last part. I've taken my walk down the Dark Path, and found the gods better served in the Light." This was the first time Raina had ever spoken, even hinted about what she had gone through to get the crescent-shaped scar on her arm. And from the dead tone in her voice when she spoke of it, it would probably be the last.

"Power. Fame. Riches. None of those things tempted you in the least?" Neither of them had heard her enter. But she wasn't the type that could be missed, by either Eye.

Moon-pale skin covering a tall, curvaceous body, with hip-length cranberry hair. Lips that shamed the red, red rose, and eyes like a cool glacier at dawn.

And an aura, gods, she was an old soul...

"No, Elder, they held no passion for me." One perfectly arched red brow rose at her response, then lowered again as she remained standing at the kitchen doorway. The early morning light setting off fiery highlights in her already amazing hair.

Raina noted Loren's shields fly up when she turned and saw the stranger in the doorway, and as Raina replied, Loren continued to strengthen them, as if

preparing for...battle.

"If you are of good intent, welcome, Elder." The cookie dough was forgotten as the stranger's aura flared with Raina's words and warding. She stayed on the outside of the door, her feet placed firmly on the patio's stones.

"Intent is an odd thing, in that from one person's perspective it could be seen as good, and yet another's, as not. So if you would be so kind as to rephrase the welcome, or come out into the morning where I may speak with you in private..."

"I think not, Clio." All heads turned to the doorway leading to the hall and the stairs. Melody's sensual alto was a bit rough from singing last night, but unmistakable in its hostility.

"Melody...Don't you have some quills to sharpen or dogs to brush?"

Raina stood silently, watching the two women stare each other down, a feeling of *deja vu* rolling over her in heavy waves as their hostility grew.

*But Man strayed from the path, and the gods grew angry with their deviant children, and the anger turned to rage, and the rage to condemnation for Their creation. So the knowledge was taken away, left to be guarded by the gods most loyal of all servants, the Valkyries.*

"The hatred has not changed between your kind? Have you learned nothing in all this time?" Both women froze, whatever words that would have leapt from their mouths swallowed back as they turned to stare at the sable-haired witch with cookie dough dripping from her spoon, splattering against the cold stone floor.

Raina could only return their stare, for she knew not where the words had come from, or what they meant. But from their reactions, they obviously meant something to these two women with the old souls and burning eyes.

"Who are you?" It was quietly spoken by Clio, but those three words screamed through the room and pounded against her shields with their intensity.

"I'm Raina." Noting that she was dripping cookie dough on the floor, she tossed the spoon back into the bowl and looked at the three women standing so silently in her usually peaceful kitchen.

"So, who's going to tell me what's going on with as little bullshit as possible?"

\* \* \* \*

Detective Warren was dreaming of the last time he had seen his sister, laughing eyes misting as she told him she loved him, right before she popped him in the head with her pillow. He was only six to her sixteen, an accident, from what his sister had told him, but always adored.

Slowly lifting unbearably heavy lids, he sat up straighter in his chair as the tense voices from down the hall drew on all his cop instincts and brought him fully awake.

Removing the book from his lap, he set it on the table next to his chair and rose, pulling the gun from his side holster in one fluid motion as he passed through the beaded doorway and headed toward the back of the building and what smelled like the

kitchen.

"So, who's going to tell me what's going on with as little bullshit as possible?" It was Raina's voice, tired and fed up from the sounds of it.

Silence greeted her question as he continued down the hall, passed the door for the bathroom and toward the silhouette of the woman standing in the doorway...

Stopping, he stood and stared at her back, her shoulder-length blond hair hanging straight and sun-streaked over an amazing figure, but that didn't interest him.

It was the gold sun earrings dangling from her ears as she turned to look at someone in the kitchen...

"Melody?"

Hostile blue eyes met a matching azure gaze filled with disbelief. Hostile became stunned; disbelief became pain-fueled anger as they stared at one another with just a few feet to separate them.

"Daniel?"

God, it was her. All this time he had thought that she was dead, and she had been here in the same city that he'd moved to, unknowingly following her...

"Goddess Bless! Daniel? Is that you?" Matching blue eyes stared at one another, the identically shaped nostrils flared as they seemingly scented the very air of the other.

Before he could say words that would have broken both their hearts, she was beside him, her head only coming to his shoulder as her arms wrapped about his waist, squeezing the breath out of him.

"Gods, I never thought I was going to see you

again..." Leaning back so that he could look at her face, he knew the joy he now saw in her eyes was genuine, that for whatever reasons she had left...his sister had always loved him.

"God, Mel...why did you leave me!"

\* \* \* \*

Raina watched as Melody turned and left the archway to the kitchen, then heard the Detective's voice echo down the hall.

Clio watched for a moment as well, memorizing every feature of the witch who unknowingly spoke for the gods, then took her leave. There would be another time, soon, when there were not so many of the Utameer about.

\* \* \* \*

"I didn't have any other choice! After I...well, I changed, and Mom said if Dad found out, he'd leave her, and..."

"Whoa, Mel, hold on. What do you mean you changed? Why would Dad have left Mom if he found out what? You're not making any sense...." The not so subtle cough had them both looking back toward the kitchen's doorway, to find Loren standing there, one platinum eyebrow raised in an 'I can't wait to hear this one' arch.

God, she was stunning....Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he looked down at his sister, then back at the sun-worshipping Aphrodite that was now



standing in the spot his sister had so recently vacated.

Hip-length platinum hair drifted around her arms by the breeze coming from the door. The light from outside causing a halo of light to form about her head, as eyes the green of all Ireland ringed with a vibrant blue returned his gaze.

Wrapping his arms around his sister, he hugged her back. Listened to her breathe against his shirt as she just held him to her, taking in his scent while he stared at this newcomer in a pastel purple sundress, its hem drifting about the lower half of her toned thighs.

She was His. In a single instant, he knew that she was the one he had searched for in every face since he was a child, dreamed of when he couldn't remember his dreams, ached for when he woke each morning...

\* \* \* \*

Loren stared at the Detective holding one of her pack, watched as his arms wrapped around Melody. Her gaze ran up those strong arms to a stubborn chin and a solid jaw. A nose that was the same shape as her pack sister's, and eyes, gods, eyes the same intense blue of Melody's as well.

Eyes that she had seen in her dreams since before her Awakening...

He was Hers. In that instant, she knew that he was the one she had been waiting for this lifetime, in every curve of a jaw and dimpled chin. The one she had found when she walked the Dream Paths, but could never hear his voice nor speak with, only watch in

silent frustration as he tried to speak to her, the distance between them growing whenever he took a step toward her.

He had not been ready to find her then.

She had thought they were not meant to meet this lifetime.

\* \* \* \*

Melody felt the building of Power from her brother, sensed Loren standing behind them, and knew her to be the cause, if not the why of it.

And then she felt it, the merging of two souls as they reached for one another across the ether, recognizing each for their Mate.

Looking up, she saw Power in his eyes, rolling around like quicksilver in their blue depths, and knew that nothing good could come of this.

Loren was already spoken for in the pack.

She gave oath to the Drottin, the one who fought for them at Council. Their Champion and, by Loren's consent, his consort. He was the right hand of the Nameer in times of battle and the physical might of the Uta when one of theirs had been wronged.

He was the colliding Power of Earth, the destructive force of Water.

And he was desperately in love with their Lore-Master.

\* \* \* \*

Raina felt the energy shift in the air as Loren walked

around the corner after Melody, felt the room sway with Power as it flowed around her in vibrating waves.

It felt much like a Compelling, but older, stronger...

Raina moved from the chopping block toward the hallway, energy pulling her toward the people now standing in the hallway silently staring at one another.

Loren's aura was whirling in a chaotic riot of colors, blurring with their speed, a myriad of emotions slamming against her shields from not one, but three creatures of Power.

*Fighting, fierce and violent, spurred on by ignorance and a mistrust of things different from themselves.*

*She stood among a pack of animals that shifted in form from one creature to another like a shadow sweeping over the moon. Their voices whispered in her mind as they spoke to one another, screaming of the treachery of the Flame Dancers and Storm Chasers. That they could not be trusted to tell the truth, for was not one of their own, one of their Sacred ensorcelled by a Lang's shadow-weaving ways proof enough?*

*The world shifted, and she stood among another race, their slender, almost delicate forms hiding the Power that lashed out at her from their eyes.*

*They, too, spoke without words, seemingly floating around her, some with iridescent wings of a butterfly and others with the scaly wings of a dragon or the feathers of a black bird. She heard their voices, though they did not speak, rage at the theft of one of their Sacred. One of them called the lightning to his command another called upon an*

*inferno from a burning bush that was struck, sending it racing toward those bound to the Earth.*

*Great sheets of water fell from the sky, sizzling as it struck the flames, while earth rolled over it, moving like a huge worm as the soil turned, taking the fire within its depths.*

*Water beat down upon them, pushing them from the skies, while the wind made funnels and swept up the creatures on the ground, tossing them high into the moonless pitch of sky.*

*"Enough!"*

"Enough!" Slipping to her knees, legs still unsteady from what she had seen. Raina felt a drop of water roll down her cheek and wasn't sure for a moment if it was from her skin or a remnant of the stormy skies she had just seen.

\* \* \* \*

Turning at her cry, Loren watched as her friend dropped to her knees, her clothes clinging tightly to her now-drenched skin as her palms smacked wetly against the stone floor. Her breathing labored as she tried once, then again, to take in a deep breath without feeling as if her ribs were bruised from the battle.

"Raina? Gods above, what happened?" Leaping from the doorway, she went to her friend's side, pulling back as she was slapped by the raw Power that surrounded Raina. Whipping out into the ether like a wild creature released from its cage.

Power. Sacred and Ancient, as it had been from the

tales of old. Power that was only vaguely remembered by the eldest of the Tribes, Power that this witch should not have...

Rainwater and freshly turned earth. Burned wood and the breeze that carried it; these scents surrounded her, inundated Raina until she could see nothing...hear nothing, but the vision she had just been given.

What in all Creation had she just seen?

"Lady Love me, Lord Protect me..." The witch's prayer, old and sacred slipped from her lips, creating sacred space where she kneeled, a casting circle that none within the confines of magic could pass without grave penalties.

Loren jumped back from Raina, her hands still tingling from the residue of Old Power that had saturated her friend's skin and the sting of the protective circle being cast while she touched her. Closing her eyes, her heart stopped as she gazed with her third-eye upon the outline of the creature that crouched before her. Paws the size of a grown man's face, ears slightly rounded with tufts at the ends, long thick tail thumping lightly on the floor. And a mane, full and proud, of a lion.

This was Raina's animal spirit, her guardian. But never before had Loren seen one of such Power outside of the pack.

And as Raina continued to recite the prayer, gathering a cloak of Power around her the likes of which none in the kitchen had ever been witness to, the aura of the spirit animal around her melded, one into another into another.

Great and noble lion, king of the element that it ruled, Earth, became a creature of feathers and long graceful neck, arched and hissing, the Swan. A creature belonging to the Fey, to the Tribe of Air...

The feathers melded to scales, the neck lengthened as the body gained mass and a tail, its wings turning leathery like a bats, a Dragon, one of the highest totems belonging to Fire. And from the dragon merged the dolphin, totem of water, free spirit, love and agility.

An errant breeze blew over the back patio wall and began whipping around the witch, drying her clothes and sweeping what remained of the vision from the forefront of her mind, so that she finally became aware of her surroundings once again. The wind caressing her cheek with an invisible hand once more, then easing into a gentle breath of a cooing bird, and was gone.

"Come, Raina, I think it's you that needs a bit of a nap."

\* \* \* \*

Aidan was walking between the worlds when he felt the world beneath him sway with a Power unlike any he'd ever felt. One that he recognized instinctively as belonging to those that had long ago left their deviant children...and to his witch.

Urging his spirit back into a body that had long ago ceased to age, he carefully walked through the thin doorway he had created between her shields around the room, and aligned his spiritual eye with

his physical.

“Blessed Twilight, what has she done now?” His body sluggishly responded to his demands that he go to her, still moving at ten times the pace of a normal human, but babe-like for his kind.

Passed the room where the two lovers slept blissfully on, out into the pink light of dawn, passed the purple door with the hexing marks that had something to do with warding off dark magic...and the IRS...

Down the stairs and into the kitchen where Raina had crumbled to her knees.

Taking immediate note of the shifters that littered the kitchen, and those he sensed that stood just on the other side of the stone patio wall, he knew it would be a bad time, in his current condition and little to no shadows, to find their truce non-existent.

Walking over to her at a more human pace, he eased down to her eye level, balancing on the balls of his feet as he felt the last of the breeze dissipate and reached out to touch her...but she was surrounded by sacred space, and something else, of the Other.

From the gray cast of her aura, he could tell that she was as near to passing out as he'd ever seen a Practitioner and knew that she would hate the weakness of doing so in front of others.

“Come, Raina, I think it's you that needs a bit of a nap.”

\* \* \* \*

She heard his voice as if from a tunnel, echoing

through her mind and fading into the blackness there.

"Aidan?" Lifting her head, his ever-changing eyes were now the gray-blue of dark thunderclouds as they tried and held her aching lost violet gaze.

"I think you need a day off from work, Raina. Care to join me for a nice, long nap?"

Loren stepped forward to protest as Raina nodded her head, lowering her wards with her consent.

She had no idea why, but she was sure there was a reason that lying beside this man as she dreamed would be a bad idea...

"I'm not supposed to like you, Aidan." The vague tone in her voice had him shaking his head at her newest insight as he stood and helped ease her to her feet.

The world swam around her for a moment before stabilizing with his hand at the small of her back.

"But you do, love, and that speaks quite highly for your good taste..."

Giving him a slightly lop-sided grin, she once again nodded her head, still inundated with some distant feeling that she'd run off and not quite caught up with herself yet.

"True...but there is so much to do..."

"It's Saturday. I can help..." Detective Warren wasn't sure on what just happened, but he knew he wanted to be around until he found out.

"Yes, and I won't be doing anything until tonight, Raina, and with Loren here, if anything happens, she knows..." Melody nudged Loren's arm and nodded. She was one of the mediators for the Council, and if she said yes, Loren couldn't stand against her.



"Aye...yes, I can handle anything that comes our way..."

Giving them all a sweet if somewhat vapid grin, Raina leaned slightly into her escort and tried to think of what needed to be done...but it was like trying to run through molasses.

Aidan felt her struggling with her thoughts and knew that if she regained her wits, there was no way he'd ever get her up to his dwelling...at least not this day.

"Come on then, Raina, we won't be far away. If they need you, they'll let you know."

Nodding her head. That made sense...and it had been quite some time since she had taken off a Saturday. Just for a couple hours anyway, she could be back by lunch. "Okay..."

Her willing consent was what he had been waiting for. Sweeping her up into his arms, he nodded to the three remaining in the kitchen and headed out the back door.

As he reached the high wooden gate, it swung suddenly inward, Evan waiting for him on the other side with his silver Jaguar already running and the passenger door opened.

Lady love Evan's gift for far-sight.

"Many thanks, Evan..." Lifting her head, Raina saw the dark-haired man give Aidan a grin as their eyes met and something was said between them.

"My, he's gorgeous..." Raina tried to recall where she might have seen him before, he felt so achingly familiar, but the thought flew from her mind as she was gently placed in the passenger seat, and her lips

were briefly covered with the warm silk of another's.

\* \* \* \*

Spells...

Aidan knew Evan had been coming to get him, and that only meant one thing...

"You found the others?"

Evan shook his head as he ran a hand through his burnt-oak hair. "The Loyal still search. Layla is at home playing nurse with some un-Awakened Utameer, and Clio is missing."

Damn, it was like Clio to go wandering when he asked her to stay at Haven...but she hated Morgan, and with the Avatar at Haven, maybe she just had to get out for a bit.

"Thank you for your timely appearance, Evan."

"I felt you here, thought you might want a ride home."

Aidan nodded his thanks again as Evan turned and began to walk back to Haven. "There now, all buckled up? Home it is, Raina." Aidan asked as he slid into the driver's seat.

Raina felt her lids droop as softly spoken, foreign-sounding words filled the car.

Aidan felt her fall into a trance-like slumber with the spell of Easing he placed gently on her brow. Feeling his body slow as it wished to do the same.

Drawing upon the energy from the stones and amber he had so recently drained, he fought off the lethargy and drove the short distance down a few back streets and into the underground parking lot of

the Towers.

Parking, he turned off the car, left the keys in the ignition and carefully lifted her out of the front seat, her sleeping head rolling against his shoulder.

Through the shadows to his private elevator, he felt his anticipation rise as he stepped from the metal box and into the foyer.

"Welcome home, my little witch..."

\* \* \* \*

"Why in all that's Sacred did you let him take her?" Loren paced up and down the kitchen as she directed Daniel now and again on what needed to be prepared next while Melody worked beside her brother.

"Loren, we all know that he won't hurt her...and Goddess knows she needs to get laid...."

"Melody!"

"Well, it's true!" Wiping off her hands on her dark purple apron with a smiling female sun and a bendhi on its forehead, she stepped in front of Loren's path, so that when Loren turned to start pacing back in the other direction, she had to stop or knock Melody over.

One did not knock over one of the mediators to the Council unless there was a damn good reason for it. Even if Melody was at least a half-century younger than she was. Once they reached their mid-twenties, time seemed to slow down for them. For the Utameer that had sworn themselves to the Lang, it was different though. As if being around creatures that were seemingly immortal, they took on that quality.

It was the only explanation for the Uta called Layla that she knew now had been merely toying with her before she would have killed her. Any Uta that could move so fast that she vanished before her own kind was an ancient among them.

"But why him? There are others..." Noting the flare of warning in Melody's eyes, she shot a glance over her shoulder and noted that although he didn't appear to be listening, she knew that he was.

"He's like you, Melody..." Loren said in explanation of her loose tongue.

Nodding, Melody sighed and patted Loren's shoulder. "I know that, and you know that, but He doesn't know that Loren." Searching her friend's eyes, Melody didn't like what she saw.

"You are bound by oath and blood to the Drottin Loren. He loves you...don't forget that."

Nodding, Loren turned away and began pacing down the hall again. "But why him!"

Melody let it go. She knew Loren was mumbling under her breath more to herself than to anyone in particular.

"How am I like you, Melody?" She knew he had been listening, but hadn't been aware that his Utameer hearing had formed before he had fully Awakened as an Utameer.

Sighing, she took the loaf of sourdough out of the oven and put another in to bake while the others finished rising.

"It's not something I can talk about with you just yet, Danny...but know that I will. Just not yet."

The detective in him argued that the answer wasn't

good enough. That he wanted to know now how passing through those front doors with the bells chiming over his head had now and forever altered his life. And he had the distinct impression he wasn't going to like a lot of it.

But Raina had brought Melody back to him, and because of her, he had finally met that elusive creature that he had only seen in dreams long forgotten.

Nodding, he leaned his head down to touch the top of Melody's, knowing a pure joy for life that he had not felt in more than twenty years.

But something still troubled him. Something was not right...

Looking down into the brilliant blue of her eyes, the same shades as his, the crow's feet that should have been there, the laugh lines...

He wasn't looking into the face of a woman who was nearing forty; he was looking at a woman who was in her mid-twenties.

"You've kept good care of your skin, Melody. I'd swear you were no more than twenty-five if you were a day." The air between them changed as her eyes became guarded and troubled.

"Well, you know what they say about a mud pack a day keeps the wrinkles away..." Her voice was overly bright, her eyes shuttered, barring him from what she was truly feeling.

"Yeah, amazing what they can do these days." So amazing that his sister, who preceded him by ten years, looked as if they were fraternal twins.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**I**t did not sit well with her.

Raina should not be with him, if Jagur knew...Jagur.

The one voice that could supercede Melody.

Stopping her pacing in the Library, she went to Raina's favorite chair in the corner and sat down, leaning her head against the high back of the chair...and paused.

She could smell him, his lingering scent surrounding her like a familiar song from childhood...Loki's Blight! She would not do this thing. She was bound to both Layla and her pack's Drottin. She could not walk down that path. Her Honor forbade it.

Grounding, she felt her body center on her third eye chakra before focusing on an image of Jagur, the colors of his aura ever swirling around him.

*Jagur...*she felt a part of her shields disconnect and head off out of the building in search of their Nameer.

Life would be so much simpler if he would just get a cell phone.

## TWILIGHT CALLING

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\* \* \* \*

Jagur felt the Calling from somewhere deep within his dreams, but no matter how he tried, he could not awaken from them.

He was in a Maze; the leaves of the ten-foot high bushes were made of silver and copper and gold, but Felt as if they were alive...

"Because they are alive..." The voice of the Other, that which was both feminine and masculine, lightly chided him for his misunderstanding.

"Where am I?" Continuing on down the path he had first chosen, the sky above him was the purple of twilight, the same color as Raina's eyes...

"Protect the Sacred..."

"What does all of this have to do with Raina? She isn't one of us..." A light laughter filled his mind, echoing off the twinkling leaves all around him until his heart felt as if it would burst with the joy of it.

"Raina is Life...Raina is Love...Protect the Sacred..."

Continuing down the path, he felt Loren call to him again, but there was no urgency to it.

Anger. Frustration, yes. But no fear of life or limb.

The leaves tinkled lightly, like the smallest of chimes around the warm wind that brushed against them, reminding him of children's laughter when they played.

"Protect the Sacred..."

"If it is Life that is Sacred...but there can be no Life without Death. Sharks must eat, deer must eat, we of the Tribes must eat..."

"You were given knowledge of the Sacred, you who we walked among, you who were our first children able to

*choose between Life and Death...*

*And you chose Pride over Life, Power over Love...defiling all that we had taught you of the Sacred..."*

*Shaking his head, he had heard the tales from the Skalds of a time when the gods had walked among their children, a paradise on Earth.*

*But the Tribes of Fire and Air joined together, as did those of Earth and Water, and there were some that would not choose sides...*

*A Fey girl, her fairy wings like those of a butterfly and skin silver like moonlight, entranced one of their kind, and ran away with him, he who could take the form of any creature, for he was A-auki, god-touched at birth, blessed by the goddess as she mingled Power with one of her Avatars.*

*She was sworn to one of the Fey, a dark and brooding creature that did not truly appreciate her, so the Avatar decided to take her to his own tribe where she would be protected.*

*They were caught between two great armies in a battle of epic proportions, and burned to ash by the Fey's roaring fires.*

*It was then that the gods left them, casting them from Their sight and making each swear that never again would one Tribe kill one from another.*

*"For they had not only taken Life that day, but Love as well...That is one side of the coin..." The duel voices said softly.*

*"But is it the truth?" Once again, the bushes around him tinkled with laughter as the wind picked up and a dense fog rolled in to surround him.*

*"Truth is in the eye of the beholder; what is True and what is not can be different for each person...Do not fight*



*for Truth; it's a jaded and often warped creature...Love in peace for the Sacred..."*

Opening one eye, he felt a hand run up his naked thigh in the purple of twilight, slipping over his hipbone and onto his arm. The red-cloaked figure knelt beside the tangled green sheets on his bed.

Jagur sighed as a lock of cranberry-colored hair fell over her leather-covered bosom to brush against the floor.

Aye...and of the Lang.

"Awake at last...I was wondering if you were going to sleep through the night as well."

Only one creature had such a bewitching voice as that.

"Clio...I've already told you...I will not be your lap dog." Pushing back the hood of her crimson velvet cloak as she straddled his thighs, the look in her ice blue eyes was both fire bright and winter cold.

"I was thinking more of a steed..." Rotating her hips against him for emphasis, caught her hips, keeping them from moving.

Leaning forward, she ran her moon-kissed hands upward over his bronzed and muscled chest and into the midnight silk of his hair.

Amber eyes connected with glacial blue as her head dipped forward to kiss the cleft in his chin, then rub her cheek against his jaw and over to his ear.

"This truce between our Tribes might not be so bad a thing after all..."

Gods, her voice was bewitching, and her scent an aphrodisiac that ran through his blood like wildfire.

Leaning forward further still, her ruby-red lips

brushed across his as one of her hands ran back down his chest to encircle the hard length of his manhood and guide it to her wet and wanting body.

"No, Clio..." But as her tight heat surrounded the tip of him, he felt his body thrusting to meet her downward motion, filling her deep and hard.

Jerking awake, he sat up, green cotton sheets still tangled around his feet, as he took in a deep breath, scenting the air for the Fey Elder.

Gods...the Fey could enchant a man from across the world. They walked in shadows and dreams. They danced in the flames as the winds blew the bonfire higher into the night sky...scorching the Earth.

Where the Utameer fought with force, the Lang fought with Guile.

Sunbathers to Moon worshippers...there could never be a lasting peace between their kind if they did not begin to trust one another.

But could they?

Could creatures of Power, literally as different as night and day, find some similar ground to unite them?

\* \* \* \*

The thing about being almost immortal, you learned patience or you went crazy from the lack of it.

But his witch truly tested his every reserve...

"Layla, Morgan is sleeping off her last vision at Haven?"

Nodding, Layla unwound her long legs from the

meditation position she had been practicing and brushed her thumb across her forehead to clear her third eye. Her midnight hair, pulled back in one long braid that fell over the black silk robe, covered her otherwise nude form.

"And how is our guest? Cleaned up and sleeping as well?" Aidan could swear that he saw her blush for the briefest of moments before she turned and nodded again.

"Well then, get some sleep, and wake me if I'm needed." She nodded as she crossed the living room, heading for her bedroom and the sleeping Utameer.

Hmmmm...well, at least she had a new toy to distract her from this chaos.

Walking past her, he double-checked the lock on the foyer elevator and set the security system to Voice Recognition Only.

If Leo decided to come back from Malibu early, he would still be able to access the suite with his incorporeal form, but Layla would have to stay in the suites.

He wouldn't chance something happening to her while he was in trance. Or her guest leaving unexpectedly.

Closing his eyes, he set the wards as well, feeling them rise in strength like a sheltering cocoon against magic's storm.

Now for those, Leo would have to knock...

Just because the Warlocks had not yet attacked in broad daylight did not mean that they wouldn't.

If Morgan were right, they would be coming for Sheila sooner than later...

Spells, they were nearly defenseless without his witch there to call the casting wards within her place of Power.

Feeling the world expand around him, he became a part of the ether, each of the Lang and Loyal, burning like bright torches in its astral mist.

Touching each of their minds with a single thought, he was surprised to note that some of the pack answered to his calling as well. It seemed they took this alliance between their kinds seriously.

And among them was one of their Elders...Loren.

*Loren of the Utameer, call your kind to you and guard your Uta until we may be more help than hindrance to you...*

*We will meet at twilight...*

*Aye, when the skies match your witch's eyes...* He replied.

*How is she?*

*She sleeps well and protected. Worry not about her, but those within the castle without its queen...*

\* \* \* \*

Returning to her surroundings, Loren sat within the velvet chair of the Library, feeling the warming glow of early morning roll over the ocean's breeze, causing the shadows of the Moon to flee for another rising and her kind to roam freely.

Hearing the knock on the front door, bells jingling lightly from the vibration, she rose from the chair and headed into the main room.

Passing through the bead-covered doorway, she

stopped when she saw who waited on the other side.

Their Drottin...and about a quarter of the pack behind him.

Morning light set off the red highlights in his shoulder-length, dark brown hair that framed a face both boyish and strong...and eyes the green of all creation. Coming alive when they spotted her through the glass...gods, she loved him.

Taking a deep breath, she went to the front door, unlocked it, and stepped back so that they could enter.

"Be ye of good intent, welcome."

Sweeping her up into his arms as he entered, he buried his face in her neck and took a deep breath, all the smells of home and heart rested within that one breath. "It's good to be home."

Hugging him in return, she rubbed her nose across the silk of his hair, wondering for the thousandth time why this amazing creature had chosen to love her. "Aye, Jared, I've missed you." Leaning back, she brushed a tan nose across his equally tanned one, forgetting for a moment their company in the kitchen.

But only for a moment...

"Everything okay, Loren?" Putting her down, Jared looked over her shoulder at the man standing in the doorway to the Library, the front of his off-white oxford shirt covered in flour from cooking.

"Aye, Detective Warren, all is well." Turning to Daniel, she felt Jared and the rest of the pack fan out behind her. They did not like the police being here in their witch's sanctuary...

"He's my brother." Melody squeezed between

Daniel's body and the doorframe to stand in front of him. Her body tense, her hands lightly clenched together as she seemingly tried to block their view of him with her own form.

"He's here with Raina's blessing...her guest." By unspoken rules, if one acted against her guest, it would be as if they had acted against Raina.

And too many of them had felt her Power, sleeping silently, to do so.

Taking that as her cue, Loren took hold of Jared's hand and led him toward the Library doorway. "We need to go see Sheila. She's been expecting you."

Nodding his head, Jared watched as both Melody and the Detective cleared the doorway, backing deeper into the Library while the others of the Pack followed him down the hall and up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Daniel waited until he heard the door at the top of the stairs close, then looked down at Melody, her body still vibrating with tension.

"Who was that?"

She knew the Who he was referring too, just as she knew he'd not like her answer. "Loren's husband."

No...

Daniel glanced up once again at the ceiling, knowing they were somewhere above him. Closing his eyes, he recalled what he had seen on entering the doorway. The tip of her toes touching the ground as he'd lifted her against his solid form, his dark hair a sharp contrast to her angelic white.

"Come on, Danny, I need you to finish the bread while I go upstairs for a minute."

"Yeah, sure, Mel." Giving his worried sister a nod and a grin, he followed her down the hall and let her pat his shoulder as she departed for the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

She watched the pain slowly drain from his eyes as she felt him ground and center.

He was a trooper...he'd gone on without her and turned out okay. He'd do the same now.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, doll."

Nodding, he was already back at the wooden chopping block in the center of the kitchen, stirring a batch of cookies.

Taking a deep breath, she sent a prayer off to the goddess that all would be well with Daniel, then hurried up the stairs. Well, hurried for the human pace she was still pretending to be...gods, how was she going to tell him?

*Hey, Daniel, did you know your sister turns into a panther during pagan rituals?*

*Yeah, you know, all the cool kids have a were-panther for a sister nowadays.*

*And there's a strong possibility that you might go all fuzzy as well!*

Oh, that would go over well.

Over the patio and into Raina's loft, she made her first right and stumbled to a halt as her pack sprawled, sat, or stood in the large living room that just simply was not made to hold this many people,

and certainly not this much Power.

"You make thirteen, Melody." Sheila's voice was soft, but the Power behind it was still recognizable.

Catching Loren's eye, Melody gave her a reassuring smile. If Loren hadn't said anything to Jared, then there was nothing to say.

If she knew one thing, and one thing only...Loren loved him.

Sheila sat in a high-backed chair by the fireplace, Balder standing next to her, his hand lightly touching her shoulder. Melody watched as their eyes met, and shared the secret smile that only lovers...

Well, damn...

Balder had never been strictly hers, but he had always come when she called. Made her laugh when she was down. Went to the Dubliner when Woodruff played and she sang with them. She had hoped that maybe...

No, not anymore.

Accepting what she felt to be right, she'd known he wasn't her life-mate, but he had been a good snuggle.

By habit, she walked over to her Uta and went down on her right knee, lowering her head and baring the back of her neck. The ultimate act of trust between their kind, and the only greeting suitable from one of the Council's mediators to the Uta that supported them.

"Bright blessings, Sheila." Feeling a cool hand lightly touch the back of her neck, the signal to rise, she came to her feet, a warm smile on her lips.

"To you as well, Melody, and to the Council." Sheila wasn't modern-day gorgeous, but the energy



that surrounded her, the vitality of all Creation, made her skin glow like the inside of a shell, alabaster shining in the moon's pale light.

For unlike many of the pack, she did not lie out in the sun until her skin turned golden. She was like night-blooming jasmine with its delicate flowers, climbing ever toward the moon.

Balder lightly brushed his hand across her red-amber hair, fawn-brown eyes rising to meet ice blue as she shook her head.

*I'll be fine, Balder, give me but a moment more to comfort the pack...*

*No, I can feel you fading as we speak. Let me take you back to bed while Jared waits for Raina to return...*

*Balder...*

*You know I speak the truth, love, you are weak, whether you wish to admit it or not...*

*I love you, Bright One...*

*As I you, my amber-haired mule...*

Laughter burst from her throat before she could contain it, while those around the room simply shook their heads.

If she was strong enough to speak between minds, she would be well soon.

The first vibration was like a low hum, as Power lightly tested the shields around them, then a second, sharp and whining rocked those within the confines of Raina's shields.

"What the—" Balder immediately pulled Sheila from her chair as others of the pack surrounded them, each casting shields, one on top of the other as shadows passed over the skylight.

\* \* \* \*

"Balder, take Sheila and go into Raina's room; 'tis the most heavily warded." Loren watched as Jared took point as Balder with Sheila and five others from the pack surrounded them, moved at a blurred pace down the hall and into Raina's Sanctuary.

The Drottins' first priority was defending the Uta...

When the front door slammed open, Melody was already in the hall, facing the door. The emaciated and bruised creatures of Nothingness, which could pass through spelled wards, entered the hallway.

"Spells...Melody!" The smells of rot and decay were overpowering, but Loren knew the scent of metal and oil.

The first to pass through the doorway moved with pack-quickness, its tarnished blade barely visible among the shreds of its shirt. It lunged at Melody, while Loren and the three remaining in the living room tried to get to the door.

But the Nothingness sank into their skin, slowing them as they struggled to get to Melody and protect their Uta.

Defiled blades glinted against the black of their robes, five more moved through the door, two joining the first as they stalked Melody, while the other three moved into the living room to confront those of the pack that waited for them.

Whatever it was that Loren would have said was pulled from her mind as the void that surrounded the grime-covered figures stole the breath from her lungs.

*What in all creation?*

Lunging, their desecrated blades slicing through at the nearest obstruction to their goal.

Loren dodged the first swipe of the blade, while two of her pack cried out from the cold metals bite. She couldn't see Melody, knew she was somewhere in the hall, but not where.

Letting out a low growl that rolled from her chest and out into the world with her challenge, she slammed her body against the cloaked figure, while her hands broke the fingers back away from the blade's handle in four snaps that were so fast the sound of their cracking was almost as one. Taking a firm grip of the bone handle, she threw her head up and into its jaw, the dull crack letting her know she had broken that as well as she twisted her body away from its stench and planted the blade hilt-deep into its chest.

Pulling out the blade, she'd taken two steps to the doorway when another Loki-blessed creature stepped into her path, its blade singing through the air toward her neck.

Throwing herself backward, her hands touched the floor as her feet came up and over, cracking against the creature's neck and sending it to sit at an odd angle on the crumbling form's neck, Melody's cry echoing down the hall.

\* \* \* \*

Melody knew she was screwed.

The hallway was wide enough for them to stand

three across, just as they were doing, three blades slicing through the air and coming so close to her flesh she could feel the air as it moved over her skin. But she couldn't give way.

Sending a prayer up to the gods, she caught the first blade in her flesh, letting out a bark of pain as metal embedded in her forearm, stopping at the hilt.

Pulling the blade from her arm as she dropped to one knee, she looked into the black depths of its eyes as she sent the blade rushing true into its stomach, sending it into a writhing mass on the ground.

Gut wounds were the worst...so much blood...

*"Melody..."*

*"Jared..."*

\* \* \* \*

Melody's cry of pain sent Power rushing through Loren's body as she made the hallway and, turning, saw Jared placing Melody behind him as he and three other females from the pack kept the remaining two dark attackers at bay.

Shifter-quick, she was at the other end of the hall and stabbing down into their backs. What had been a desecrated athame in her hands became a blessed thing as it seemingly found every vital organ and ruptured it with the force of her blows.

They collapsed as one, her arm shaking above her head.

"Loren, ease down, love. I don't think anything could get up again after that." Jared's calm voice slowly cleared the numb feeling that always came

over her when she fought. His hand touched her blood-covered arm, stepping over the bodies that continued to writhe in immortal agony...

Gods, they were Lang!

"Jared, they're Tribe."

Nodding without looking at the bodies, he eased the blade from her hand as he swept her up against his chest, taking her scent deep into his lungs.

"They are of the Lang..." Melody's whisper eased over their minds as Balder opened the bedroom door, Sheila at his side.

"Call the Healer. If anyone can save them, Raina can."

\* \* \* \*

*She stood atop a cloud, looking out over the vast expanse of nature at her most vital, most brilliantly alive...as if it was all one huge volcano.*

*Lava so hot, it burned white as the sacred buffalo, was surrounded by orange and red flames topped with blue and green jets that sprang from the very core of all creation.*

*The sky was black with sulfur, the sun just a distant prick of light on the horizon...*

*But Power swirled all around her...it seemed that Life was a force in and unto itself and even in this unforgiving place, would find a way.*

*"Life is the one great Truth in all existence. It can create any and everything from the desolation you see before you...Life is the force that you feel when you ask the elements to do your bidding...Life is the essence of magic and magic is the essence of Life..." Two voices spoke as one*

*in her head, filling her mind with their words.*

*"And what of Love? Is that not a sacred thing as well?" She heard the two voices that spoke as one, one masculine and one, laugh.*

*"Love...Life...they are the same. All that you have seen in your many lifetimes, has it not shown you this? It is when our children forget that they are all one being, that when they forsake Life for greed or Power, they are only forsaking themselves, that true Love is forgotten."*

*"Love thy neighbor..."*

*"As you yourself would wish to be Loved." They continued, "Accept them for the lonely creatures that they are, and with your acceptance, mayhap they will remember that they are never alone, for they are Loved."*

*"And Life is Love..." Raina whispered.*

*"And We Are Life..."*

*Their words, echoing faintly, faded from her mind as her eyes slowly opened.*

*She did not recognize the gold velvet canopy above her or the burgundy silk sheets that sighed over her bare skin in slightly erotic splendor.*

*Stretching for the pure bliss of the sensation, she felt her nipples pucker beneath the silk, and sighed in lazy contentment.*

*Raina turned onto her side, her eyes flaring slightly at the gorgeous view of the Bay from the floor to ceiling windows and the sun that was just beginning to set over the horizon. Turning the sky brilliant shades of scarlet, orange and gold.*

*"I've always loved to watch the sun go down. Twilight is just as beautiful, when the sky has turned the exact shade of your lovely eyes."*

Turning over, the sheets sighing over her bare skin, she met a pair of sapphire blue eyes...eyes that had seen far too much and were seemingly eternal.

He stood in the doorway of...from the sounds of the running water...his bathroom, the white marble tiles on the floor glowing under the low setting of the lights.

"I sit on the roof at night...but my view is nothing like yours."

Aidan moved away from the doorframe, his hips wrapped in a deep purple towel. Raina had to close her eyes for a moment and open them again just to be sure...

Nope, she wasn't dreaming. He really was that beautiful.

His skin seemingly glowed copper...from the setting sun, no doubt...and his lion's mane of golden hair fell freely past mid-back as he covered the distance between them.

The room was filled with the rosy glow of sunset, adding a dream-like quality to the decadence that surrounded her and the beauty of the man that now stood beside the bed, staring at her with those endless midnight eyes.

"I've slept all day?"

Nodding, he knelt beside the bed so that he was at eye level. "I was beginnin' to wonder if the fair lass was waitin' for me to kiss and wake her." The brogue was soft and lilting, flowing through her blood like a physical caress.

"Och, but then I went and spoiled it by waking to soon." She teased in a matching brogue. Reaching out,

she ran her fingers lightly over his jaw and felt the silk sheet begin to slip as she unthinkingly leaned toward him, answering the silent request in his eyes.

He met her more than halfway. The warm velvet of his lips touched lightly upon her in question, then more firmly.

Running her fingers into his hair, she pulled him with her as she rolled onto her back, glorying in the feel of him above her. The living silk of his hair caressing her neck and shoulders as his lips continued to tease her senses.

"Open for me, little love; let me taste you." A shiver of desire ran through her body from head to heel at his words, a verbal caress that echoed in her mind as she complied.

A velvet tongue, hot and knowing, slipped past her parted lips, dipping into her mouth to play with her tongue as his body moved to more completely cover her. The silk sheet slid further down her torso until it pooled between them at her waist.

Nipping at his lower lip playfully, she controlled his head with her hands in his hair, holding his lips just a breath above hers as she lightly ran the tip of her tongue over his lower, then upper lip.

Aidan lightly pulled against her grip, so she released his hair and he swept her mouth against his once again, his hands finding hers and holding them above her head as his smooth, muscular chest rubbed back and forth across her breasts, his mouth finding her jaw.

"Ohhh..." Her moan brought a purr of male satisfaction from deep in his throat as his lips slipped



lower and began nibbling lightly on her neck.

Raina pressed against his hold on her hands until he released them, digging his hands into her sable mane. Arching her chin away from him, and fully exposing her graceful neck to his heated assault.

Her body hummed with need as her hands ran down his sides, tugging off the towel and tossing it to the floor. Only to return to their exploration of his glowing skin, sliding downward and over the flexing muscles of his firm buttocks.

The silk sheet slid further away as her legs parted to give his hips room between her thighs, his erection pressing hot and hard against her pelvis as her hips lifted silently in sweet offering.

A nagging at the back of her mind caught her unexpectedly, shifting away into the nothingness again as he brought his lips back to hers, the tip of his shaft parting the moist, needy folds and sliding into her.

"Ohhh, gods...so good..." Raina moaned.

He filled her, stretching her to accommodate the size and length of him. His lips once again falling to her neck as he moaned. Her tight sheath squeezed him as he slid deeper into her, a little more with each thrust until he was buried to the hilt, and stopped.

"Aidan...please..." Her hands had stroked their way up his back and now rested in his hair.

Aidan lifted his lips from her neck. The urge to sink his fangs into the rapidly beating pulse there burned through his veins as her tight sheath surrounded him. He knew not to let her see his eyes, for when the Hunger was upon him, his shields were

down, and she could see any number of things in their depths.

Kissing his ear, her body clenching with an aching need that all seemed to center in her groin, she lightly tugged at his hair, silently requesting that he look at her. The nagging of some memory was once again scratching at her mind as he lifted his head and found her lips, easing his tongue past as his hips began slowly thrusting into her wet and willing form.

Something sharp pricked her lower lip, but the pain was quickly forgotten as he sucked upon the wound, his hips thrusting him deeply into her body as she wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles over the small of his back as a low moan built in her throat.

She tasted so sweet, her blood upon his tongue filling his senses with a need for more as her hips rose to meet his every thrust. The urge to take and give Power at the same time common among the Gathering...but not so among the unknowing.

Raina felt his inner turmoil, his body tensing, his movements becoming rougher with it, and it eased the fire that burned in her blood, clearing her mind.

Leaning her head back into the pillow, her hands in his hair kept him from following her; giving her the space she needed to focus on his face.

"Aidan...what's wrong?"

Aidan looked away from her, out into the now twilight filled skies, his golden hair shielding his face as he stilled within her, his breathing harsh and ragged.

Lowering a hand to his jaw, she applied a light

pressure, but he would not let her see his face. "Aidan?"

Gods, the very sound of her voice made the need to taste her rise higher in his throat. "Be silent, love, I cannot control my...need if you do not..."

Brow crinkling in confusion at his words, she lifted her lips to his ear and lightly nibbled upon it. "Take what you will of me, Aidan, it is freely offered."

A low growl of frustration ripped through his chest as he finally gave into her request and looked at her.

Fire, fierce and hot, raced through black eyes, scorching her with its hunger as his lips slowly parted, revealing the long fangs that had slipped from his upper gums.

Violet eyes widening in surprise was less of a shock than her sheath melting around his shaft as her body reacted to this new knowledge with a rush of desire.

Instinctively, he thrust into her again, his eyes holding hers as he pulled from her welcoming heat and thrust back in again, watching as her lids lowered to half-mast with the pleasure of it.

Lowering his lips to hers, he brushed a fang along her lower lip, taking care not to prick her as her body shivered, her inner muscles tightening around him in need.

"Why is it you're not screaming in terror, my little witch?"

How could she possibly explain to him the fascination she had always had for vampires without sounding like a bit of a necrophiliac?

"Vampires never scared me. Intrigued..."

tantalized...yes, but..." Licking the place where he had cut her lip earlier, his eyes two endless pools of hungry mica, she knew what he silently asked.

Nibbling his lower lip, she answered him with her actions, turning her face to the window and offering her neck.

A shudder of both relief and need swelled through him at her unforgettably giving act. His heart swelling with whatever he felt for his witch threefold, giving him the control he had so needed.

"I do not deserve you..." He was humbled by her simple acceptance, but it did not ease the hunger, and he could not resist what she freely offered.

Thrusting within her again, his movements smooth and deep, her eyes closed with the pleasure of it as she felt his breath upon her cheek. Satin lips brushed along her jaw and down the graceful column of her neck to the base of her throat where her pulse beat a bit rapidly, but without fear. Her body jumped lightly when his lips touched her pulse, his tongue running over it as his fangs lightly scraped her skin.

\* \* \* \*

"Easy, love..." Calling his Power, he shoved it into her unresisting form as his teeth sank into her skin, caressing his tongue with her life force.

Swallowing her blood as it filled his mouth, hot and metallic, he continued his thrusting, which had become slow and deep, a moan of pleasure slipping past her lips every time he filled her, a sigh when he withdrew. Her hips lifted to meet him, legs wrapped

around his waist as her body climbed toward release.

"Aidan...gods, Aidan..."

He felt her begin to spasm around him as he quickened the pace, fast and deep, surging into her again and again as he drank of her, like the sweetest ambrosia. Feeling her fall apart beneath him, he took a final swallow before willing the wound closed. Licking the last of her blood from his lips, he turned her face back to him, his eyes holding hers as she came, her legs shaking around his waist with the force of it as she screamed.

Easing her legs from around his waist, he continued slowly thrusting, not yet ready to let his witch rest for the night.

Arching his back, his tongue found her nipple, sucking it into his mouth and biting gently, the piercing quick and painless for her, but covering his tongue with the taste of her, his hips rolling as he thrust, pulling a moan of pleasure from her throat as her hands entwined in his hair, keeping him at her breast.

He felt her climax coming again, her low moans becoming higher-pitched as her head thrashed back and forth on the pillow, his thrusts becoming swifter as he claimed her other breast, biting into her satiny bosom and drinking there as well.

Higher and higher she climbed, tightening around him as he thrust into her, his lips and tongue a hot brand on her breast.

\* \* \* \*

"Aidan!" Shivering, she came again and then once more as she felt him stiffen above her. Following her into release with a low moan, throbbing deep and long within her.

Aidan lifted his head, mica eyes meeting violet as he remained within her, his face lowering so that his nose could nuzzle her neck. His lips running up and down, kissing the long column of tanned flesh.

Running her hands down his back, she lightly raked her nails over him from waist to shoulder and back again.

Feeling the prick of his teeth on her neck once again, she moved her hands into his hair and arched her neck, never feeling the breaking of flesh as he consumed her with his Power. She was surrounded by the aching need, the exchange of Power, and the feeling of him growing inside her still-spasming flesh once again.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan sipped of her essence, his fingers brushing against her nipples as he became hard. Taking a few more swallows, he willed the wound closed and looked up at her.

Her eyes were still a bit dazed, and he could still taste the Power of the Other in her.

He had taken advantage of her, and he knew it.

But until she gave him grief about it...

"Aidan...again?" His hips had begun thrusting as he'd lost himself in her eyes.

## TWILIGHT CALLING

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\* \* \* \*

"Aye, my little witch, until you tire of me, or we pass out." The burr in his words rolled through her blood like an aphrodisiac, calling her to wrap her legs about his waist once again and her arms about his neck.

She didn't know the woman who was lying in this bed with a vampire, but at the moment, she didn't care to know any other.

"Well, then..." She began.

*Raina...they need you...*

Jerking awake, her hands clutched against her gray jeans, her violet V-neck sticking slightly to her moist skin...gods, what a dream.

The wall she faced was covered with drapes, but she knew if she pulled them aside, the sun would have only moved an hour or so further in the sky since she had left the Loft.

Aidan...

"Yes?"

"Shit!" Commanding her heart to slow back to a more normal pace, she knew that if she turned over, he would be there, sleeping beside her...with all of her cloths on.

A dream...

*Yet not a dream...*

Rolling across and off the bed, she stood and turned, getting ready to wail into him for whatever it was he had done, and stopped.

"What in all that's blessed?"

There he seemingly slept, his body unmoving, even the rise and fall of his chest so slow as to be almost

imperceptible.

*Or as some would say...un-blessed...*

Quietly, she searched the gold velvet drapes tied at each end of the bed, as if she would find the answer to all this in their folds...

*Raina...they need you...*

*Luis? What's wrong?*

*Some of Lore's friends have been hurt...they need you...*

*Spells...*

Sensing that Luis had found something else to amuse him, she sat on the plush burgundy carpet, grounding and finding her center, only taking a single well-formed thought.

Feeling her spirit expand past her body and into the infinity of the ether, she searched for Loren's light and brushed against it. Asking for her attention.

*Raina?*

*Aye, Loren, what goes on?*

*We need you; some of my friends have been hurt. We can't take them to a hospital...*

*I'll be there shortly. Find Fala's number on the blackboard in my kitchen and have her come as well...*

*Your teacher?*

*Aye, none better...*

Raina opened her eyes to find the ever-changing blue of Aidan's watching her from a new position. Laying on his stomach, hands beneath his chin at the end of the bed, waiting for her to come back to him.

"Lady love, you're a beauty." The burr in his voice rolled over her skin and through her blood, reminding her of the dream just past.

"Was it a dream, Aidan?"



Shrugging, his strong shoulders moving up and down with the motion, he opened his mouth to say something, closed it, then shook his head and rolled off the bed, landing on his feet.

She watched the muscles play beneath the tanned skin of his chest as he walked around the bed and crouched down before her, one knee touching hers as he touched her jaw.

"It was as real as you wish it to be." The burr was barely detectable in his voice now, but it still sent a shiver racing down her spine.

"I don't know what I want right now..."

Leaning forward, he lightly brushed his lips across her forehead before getting up and heading into a room that appeared to be a closet.

Gods, he was completely naked!

Looking down quickly, she reassured herself once again that she still had her clothes on and rose to her feet as well.

Raina turned toward the door. A lovely creature stood there, watching her with eternal almond eyes, her long black hair flowing over her black silk-covered shoulders and down to her hip.

"Layla, we're going back to the Kestrel's Loft if you would like to come." Shaking her head, Layla left the doorway, out into the other room.

Spells, were all of his friends drop-dead gorgeous?

Jumping as his hand slid down the back of her neck, she glared at him for spooking her before she could ease her annoyance.

"Sorry, you just startled me." Unconsciously, she ran her gaze down the black ribbed V-neck sweater

and form-fitting black jeans. Then shook her head when she realized she had given him the once-over. What was happening to her?

"Ready, then?" Wiping his thumb across his forehead, he told his fatigued body that once they got there, he'd crash in her bed until dusk.

"As I'll ever be."

\* \* \* \*

She couldn't feel her arm...

Melody sat in the green kitchen, her arm propped up on the table as her head began to spin.

Spells, she couldn't feel her shoulder.

"Melody, you need to stay with us...you know how hard it is to find someone who can put up with the rest of the Council." Smiling weakly, she knew that something was very wrong.

The wound should have been completely healed by now, but it wouldn't stop bleeding. As if the flesh refused to mend.

"You took that blade in your arm on purpose; I saw you do it." Jared's voice was chiding and questioning at the same time, bringing another grimace to her lips.

"He had a blade, I needed one. I figured that was the quickest way to get one."

Jared shook his head, dark brown hair brushed against his shoulders at the practical answer. That was Melody—reliable, practical to a fault, and too damn softhearted...

"That would have been fine, but you took a

desecrated athame, a sacred blade. That's why the wound doesn't heal. It will need a Healer to work their magic."

Feeling her world begin to spin again, she grounded a second time and focused on breathing, in and out, in and out.

"Melody..." His voice came from a far distance, like an echo down a deep well, his concern apparent, but she could not answer him.

"Leave her be. She needs to save her strength." Raina...

Taking in a deep breath, Raina let none of the fear for this woman show as she knelt beside her, ignoring the wet, red towels that were piled beneath her on the floor, or the gray tone to her skin.

*She's dying, Raina...*

*Oh, really, I hadn't noticed that, Luis. Do you have any other epiphanies for me before I see if I can save her?*

*When the gods call them, there is no magic that will hold them...*

*I can only do what They have gifted me to do, no more, no less...*

"Can I help with anything?" Daniel stood in the doorway to the kitchen; his shirtsleeves rolled up and spattered with his sister's blood.

"Aye, Daniel, come here and keep the pressure over her artery while I get some of my healing salves from my room." Waiting until his hands had replaced Jared's without a mishap, she stood, touched Melody's golden head once lightly, and then was off, running silently down the rug-covered hall, sliding the last few steps and stumbling into her room.

Aidan was once again passed out cold on her bed, one arm tossed over his eyes while the other held her black silk wrap against his chest.

Why that tugged at her heartstrings she had no idea, and chided herself for it the entire time she was in the bathroom grabbing her salves and praying that she could call Melody back from where she was heading.

*Lady love her, Lord protect her, in this, her time of need.  
Cast your eyes down upon her with mercy,  
Hear the plea of your child as we walk between the  
worlds  
Of the living and the dead.  
Let the gifts you have given me heal what another has  
torn asunder.  
So mote it be...*

Carefully, she took two jars of salves Fala had taught her to make long ago, a white, a red and a black candle, and some sage...when healing, she'd discovered long ago that the body didn't have a preference for a certain religion's healing magic, just so long as it worked.

Keeping her eyes on the door, refusing to look over at the bed as she rushed through the room, she never saw his eyes open or the small smile that touched his lips. Nor heard the calming spell he silently cast to slow her racing heart.

Walking quickly down the hall, she made it back to the kitchen in less than a minute from when she'd left them.

Goddess, she looked so pale...

"All you need do is remove the dark magic that keeps the wound from closing; her body will do the rest." Jared's words were calm and low against her ear, their meaning for a moment lost to her until finally...

"She will need stitches, within as well as without. She's severed an artery."

"No, Raina, trust me in this. Remove the blight upon the wound, and she will need no more from you," Jared argued.

"Who are you?" Shaking her head, she set out her candles and salves on the table. The Healer trance fell over her hectic mind, calming it, slowing it, focusing, so that all she saw was the sickly red light swirling with streaks of black that surrounded Melody's forearm.

Whoever he was, he was right. The blade that had made this wound had been a cursed one. And it was rapidly draining the life force from Melody.

"I have never seen magic such as this before..."

"I have, and it's a good thing you called me when you did, or this poor thin'd be deader than shrimp in gumbo 'fore long." Fala...

Remaining in trance, she felt the other Healer's light slide smooth and calming in beside her, as the older woman kneeled at her side.

Opening Melody's unresisting mouth, Fala placed a small egg-cloth packet beneath her tongue and closed it again. "It will slow the poison."

Jared and Daniel nodded, as if saying yes, they understood, or yes, proceed; she didn't right care one

way or the other.

"Now, Raina, I'm going to need you to draw the dark magic away from her and into you, or it'll jump right back in her." Raina nodded her head in understanding, knowing what she was about to do would bring her nothing but pain. But it was the way of a Healer; she would do whatever she could to keep this one torch burning bright.

"Jared, I need you to hol' my satchel for me, and when I'm needin' somethin', you give it to me straight quick, you got me?"

"Yes, Fala, I understand."

Raina slowly felt her focus fade away from what was going on in the world around her, shifting from two eyes to One, she placed one hand beneath Melody's arm, and the other took her limp hand.

The first would push the energy down her arm; the second would take it within her. This way Fala could access the wound as she needed.

Everything around her slowly became black, like the pitch-darkness of a deep cave, except for the fierce red light that burned above her hand and the black streaks that clung hard and fast to Melody's life force.

*First, you must break the bindings...* Fala's voice echoed in her mind from memory's long past.

Focusing on the black strings that wound tight around her arm, she saw her spirit hand move with a blade burning pure white, the tendril licking out and over the red haze, then splitting the blackness in two...but as soon as she broke one binding, another took its place.

*"This is beyond the wounds of mortal men. It will need*

*something of the sacred to remove it..."*

Calling sacred space, she felt someone to her right light the white candle, then the red, and finally the black. And as the black candle's flame burst to life, She who was the Crone, ancient hag and wise elder called upon for banishing and change, touched the back of Raina's neck, cold and eternal.

The white light of her spirit blade swirled to blackness but with the deep obsidian of the Mother's eyes at night, the eternal that all creation sprang forth from.

Raina placed the blade upon the cursed bindings, and they slowly shriveled away to nothing. It left the angry wound with its red glow free to be pulled from over the wound, down her arm, and into Raina's open palm.

Lady Bright! It burned bone deep and soul weary, dragging the breath from her lungs as she pulled it further into her hand and up to her wrist.

"Will you look at that there, closing up like warm butter!"

Easing from the trance, she lifted heavy lids to see a now sleeping Melody, cradled in her brother's arms. The wound that had a moment before almost cost her life left only a thin pink line where the knife had broken the skin.

"Why do I sense others that are in worse pain?"

Raina raised her head at Fala's words, casting out her senses for the ones her Teacher felt.

Pain, so intense it made her nauseous. And despair, with a wedge of hopelessness turning her palms cold...she had only sensed this agony twice

before.

"Is Sheila well?" Sheila stepped into the room from the hallway, her eyes red and puffy with tears...but not for Melody.

"We don't think you can do anything for them...they are too far gone."

Standing, on slightly shaky knees, Raina motioned for Sheila to show her; following her into the living room.

Six decrepit bodies, black and blue with misuse lay on the floor, writhing in agony as soft moans passed their cut and chapped lips.

*"Aidan, I need you, and any that can donate Power..."*

*"Coming, love, they are all coming..."*

Raina knelt beside the first creature, and took a startled breath when she noted the fangs that had slipped from his gray gums...what had happened to him?

"Fala, get my crystals from my room. Loren, call my coven..."

"No Raina, no more can know of this than you." It was Aidan, kneeling beside and slightly behind her, staring down at his friends in blatant agony.

"Then you are calling more of your kind? They have been drained of Power, and until we can make them strong enough to take back their own..."

"Friends are coming...can you save them?" The hopelessness in his tone told Raina that he didn't believe she could...Hades, she didn't know if she could either, but she was going to try.

"With my last breath if I have to." A Healer would let herself die to save another life; it was the price she



paid for the scar on her arm.

Fala knelt at her other side, a basket full of charged stones, some the size of a man's head, resting on her hip.

"Place a stone at each head, foot, and over their heart chakras." Raina ignored the negative thoughts that surrounded her, and fell into her Healer's trance.

If the gods meant for them to live, they would do so. And if she could push the odds in their favor, she would so as well.

Calling the crone's black blade back to her spirit hand, she saw the numerous wounds across his body and began to mend them...

Power, sweet and rich, surrounded her, pressing against her and into her as she worked. Each time she began to fade, another would feed her, giving her what she needed to force-feed the decrepit creatures before her. To heal them, call them back from the brink of oblivion, and into their painful reality.

Blade cutting, hands mending, pain taking, wounds closing. Everything became a blur as she simply worked on one body after another, the Crone working through her hands as the soft sound of sacred songs being sung danced across her soul.

*Lady love them, Lord protect them, your children, in this, their time of need...*

She could do no more for them.

Opening her eyes, she tried to focus, but was unable to as her world began to spin. Closing them, she leaned back, falling until someone caught her up in their arms and began carrying her, the world around her still perceived with her third eye. She

noted the brilliance of her wards as they pulsed with each of her heartbeats. Down the long hall to the room that shone crystal bright. Everything within it touched by sacred space that lay dormant until called upon by one in need.

And the creature that curled up beside her in bed, his colors brilliant and shifting, focused on her as she laid her head on his shoulder, a helpful hand settling her arm over his waist.

"She will need to master the dark magic, bend it to her will, and transform it to something white and healing."

\* \* \* \*

Easing her beside Aidan, Jagur touched her cheek once, a memory from a dream long past sifting to the surface of his mind.

*I love you, Jagur, from the night I cast for you beneath the full moon's light and before. 'Til this heart stops beating, I will always love you...*

*As I you, my Twilight... as I you...*

Gods, why had he forgotten? How could he have ever left this woman on his own accord? She was what he had searched for in the stars each night. He had held paradise in his hands and simply walked away?

She was the face that called to him in dreams. The tears that he had heard falling had been hers...she had been crying for him.

And now it seemed, once again, he would lose her...for now.

Touching his fingertips to his lips, he brushed them lightly across her forehead.

*"For what we had, my Twilight...and if the gods will it, for what we will have again."*

Turning, he shut the door behind him as he left the room and headed back toward the kitchen. There were others of his pack that needed mending.

"Now if someone wouldn't mind telling me, what in the Hell is going on?" Melody's brother.

Yes, Jared had briefly told him about this one, a detective, no less. And from the feel of him, one of the Utameer yet to Awaken.

They had the same deep azure eyes. But where his hair was a dark auburn, hers was sun-streaked gold. Where she was cool, he was hot. But he had followed his sister, unknowingly, after all these years. He had followed her Home.

"Have you ever found comfort by immersing your body in water? To ease a fire that seemed to burn in your blood on nights when the sky had nothing to light it but the stars?"

\* \* \* \*

Daniel turned to the doorway, where the one Melody called Jagur stood wearing nothing out of the ordinary—a dark gray shirt T-shirt, and blue jeans—but there was something...

They were near the same height. But Daniel had no doubt in his mind that this man could pummel him to the ground. There was a physical force that surrounded him, sparked in his deep amber eyes,

warping the very air around him.

"Have you ever felt kinship with one animal more than any other, so much so, that you would dream that you *were* that animal?"

A tingling began to run down his spine as something about this man pulled at him, calling to something in him so familiar...

"Have you ever moved faster than a normal person should be able, in times of fear or anger? Or had wounds that healed with amazing speed?"

Nodding, his mind ran over the numerous times he should have been dead, from knife or bullet, but had seemingly moved beyond its reach, just a hair's breath, but enough to evade it.

And the times he had been hurt, how the doctors said he was such an amazingly fast healer. His nickname at work was Clark Kent.

"Yes." Everyone in the room heard it, the pent-up emotion, the questions, the knowing that he was different at some level from the other cops at the station. That he had been different his entire life.

"Yes then, I thought you might have." Jagur crossed the kitchen to stand in front of him. Melody sat in a chair beside him, her head resting on his leg as she watched the play unfold before her. She knew the answers to these questions. Now it was up to her brother to decide what path in this life he wanted to take.

"You and I are kin, Daniel, just as your sister is my sister, your mother is my mother..."

Daniel knew that something was expected of him to pass this test, but as every other person in the room

seemed to know the answer, he did not.

Standing in silence, he felt something awaken deep within his soul and begin to stretch...unfolding as it wrapped itself around him, calling to senses he hadn't been aware of.

Slowly, as his vision sharpened to a crystal clarity and the colors became more vivid, he began to hear the others breathing softly down the hall, then their heartbeats...then their thoughts.

*Welcome home, little brother... Melody.*

*Awaken, little sleeper... Jagur.*

*Mayhap in another lifetime, we will find each other again... Loren.*

*Kneel before your Na-meer, Daniel, son of our sister Dana, child of the Tribes of Earth and Water, and be welcome...*

Searching the faces in the kitchen, he found Loren's gaze and knew that she had spoken to him. That there might be nothing more than friendship between them this lifetime. But they would meet again...

Holding her gaze, he slowly stepped away from his sister and knelt before Jagur, finally releasing her eyes as his head instinctively tilted downward to bare the back of his neck.

Warm fingertips brushed lightly across his skin in an ancient pattern of Norse runes, calling to the totem within him, to awaken the Gift.

Back arching, muscles flexing, his body felt as if it were on fire as his vision became a dark well. The only thing remaining, a single, tiny point of light that began to grow brighter and larger until his entire world was nothing but a silver ball of Power.

*"The Gift we give is from the Sacred...as you were one of Our First Children, you will keep returning unto this plane, to watch over those that have forgotten us, and protect them from those who wish to keep it so..."*

Their voices twined through his soul, both masculine and feminine echoing in his mind, to settle securely in his heart as tears slid down rough, unshaven cheeks.

"Welcome home, little brother..." A tanned hand lifted his chin.

His eyes closed to ward off the tears, but they refused to stop.

Jagur knelt down in front of him, his amber eyes found and held Daniel's misty azure gaze as the look of wonder filled them, a knowing that he was indeed...home.

"You are one of the Vanir now, Daniel. An ancient race that once walked among the elder gods. Ones that at times such as these...still do."

Vision blurring with tears, he leaned forward to be wrapped in this new brother's welcoming embrace. Only to look up and see the kitchen packed with people he knew he had never met this lifetime but in some part of him had never forgotten.

*"Welcome home..."*

Separating, they both stood. Melody's arms wrapped around him from behind as his eyes searched for Loren in the new faces of his family. But she was gone.

*"Yet never far away...such is our way..."*

Then the young woman, slight as an elf, with hair the shade of red amber stepped forward from among

them. He knew her as he knew his own name.

"Uta." At his whisper, she smiled, and he was stunned by the beauty of her spirit and the Power that wrapped around his mind with a single touch.

"Yes, you know who I am, as you would in the darkest cave from a single breath from my lips." And with those words, she cupped his face in her hands and lowered his mouth to hers.

Taking a single breath, she blew her Power into him, marking him forever as one of their Tuk-cha and lighting the last place that had remained dark within him.

"Until the full moon rises, little brother. Then we shall see what form your spirit has chosen for you." Fawn-colored eyes, Earth mother of all creation, smiled back at him. As she drew away, a giant of a man with shining golden hair took her up against his side.

He did not need to ask what she spoke of, for he knew. As he now remembered many things forgotten until this moment, and his heart expanded to include every Vanir of the pack as his Tuk-cha. For he could do no less.

\* \* \* \*

Loren stood in the hallway, her arms wrapped around Jared as he kissed her, needing to claim her lips as he did her heart.

For he had felt the bond between his newest brother and his mate in the kitchen as Daniel had knelt before Jagur...and he had known fear. Fear that

he would lose his love...

"I love you, Loren. Goddess bless, I love you."

The whispered words against her lips filled her heart anew with love for their Drottin. He was not perfect, as no creature could be, but she never had a doubt in her mind that he loved her...and that she loved him.

"As I you, Jared, as I you." Running her lips across his one last time, she gently nudged his shoulder and stepped away from the wall.

"Now go and watch over our Uta while I sit with Raina for a time." Nodding, he gave her a quick grin and headed back into the kitchen.

Walking down the hall, she silently opened the door, slipped into the room, and closed it behind her.

Raina slept, her body turned away from the window, with Aidan spooned behind her, an arm wrapped around her waist.

Even in Trance he turned to her. Even in a Healer's dreams, she accepted him.

Mayhap there was some good in the Shadow Dancer after all...



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Nothing ever truly dies...it simply changes...*

Raina once again floated, with the earth miles below and aching beautiful. Her heart feeling like it would break as those simple words echoed within her mind.

*And what of Luna? Does she dance within the starlight that reflects in my tears? Does she know that her mother has never forgotten her amber-eyed baby?*

*How can one forget what one has never left?*

Letting the tears flow freely as she spun in the air, her eyes searching as she pulled her hair whipping wildly away from her face...but saw nothing.

*You look without, when what you seek rests within...*

Raina let out a scream of defiance...or anger...or pain...she did not know.

*I cannot kiss a memory. I cannot hold the past. What lies within is a shadow of those I loved...*

*How can you have walked upon this world for so many lifetimes, and only mourn the passing of those you loved in this one...*

*Nothing of the Sacred ever truly dies...*

*"Raina...come on, Twilight, let me see..."*

*"Jagur?"* Cracking open her eyes slowly until she

was sure that the curtains were pulled, blocking the coming sunset...odd how she could always feel the rising and setting of the sun...

"Hey, Twilight, how are you feeling?" Rough, warm velvet...she had always loved his voice, flavoring the ordinary into something sensual and sweet all at the same time.

"Mmmmm...like I broke my vow of never drinking Black Water again." Letting his soft chuckle roll over her heart and ease into a memory for future nights alone and lonely, she lifted her hand unthinkingly, running it along his jaw and into his silky, ebony hair.

"I missed you, Jagur...gods, I missed you so..." Twilight. It had been his pet name for her; she hadn't been called that since he'd left.

Jagur leaned into her touch as Raina watched his eyes slowly close. Rubbing his jaw along the inside of her wrist, sending a shiver of remembered sensations running through her body.

"I think I missed you, too..." The confused question in his tone had Raina's heart clenching...that he still could not recall her...a spell that could last a decade unaided by the caster, was one that she could not break.

If he wanted to recall all that they had been, he would have to do so on his own.

Raina sighed softly at the lost look in his eyes. She didn't move away when he leaned toward her and lightly brushed warm satin lips across hers. Achingly familiar as a favorite song from a time long forgotten, holding her in its sway.

"Come on, Jagur, you said you wouldn't wake her." Aidan.

Jagur sat back on his heels, staying crouched beside the bed, as Raina sought and found Aidan coming out of her bathroom wearing her black T-shirt that had 'Magic Happens' in silver script across the chest. But where it was loose fitting for her, on him it was skintight.

"It's just not right when a guy looks better in my clothes than I do." Shaking her head in amusement, she sat up on her elbows as her eyes lowered to meet amber orbs filled with questions.

Awkward was just not the word here. Even damned awkward didn't quite do it.

Complicated. Her life was getting way too complicated.

*Hungry yet? You haven't eaten all day...*

*Aidan...what are you?...*

*"I'm the lad that's going to go to the kitchen and get you a bite to eat..."*

*A bite...funny...*

*No pun intended...*

Spells...maybe complicated wasn't the right word either...

Bizarre...her life was getting really bizarre.

Watching him leave from the corner of her eye, she kept most of her focus on the man crouched beside her bed. Hair the black of a crow's wing slid straight down the skin-hugging dark T-shirt that covered the broad expanse of his chest.

These two men, they were like night and day, but the Power that flowed around them...held a similarly

unforgettable intensity...

"I'd ask if you were a vampire, too, but your energy just isn't the same as his." Five days ago, those words would never have crossed her lips. Then again, five days ago, she hadn't been bitten by one...did a dream-bite count?

Moving with a grace that never seemed to stop fascinating her, he shook his head and rose, standing above her as Power radiated in a rainbow of colors all around him.

"No, Raina, I'm not of his Tribe. Unfortunately, now is not the time. The sun is setting. The hunt begins soon." Gently, he touched her forehead with the tips of his fingers.

"And will I be going on this hunt?"

\* \* \* \*

Shaking his head again, he trailed his fingertips away from her skin and back to his blue-jean covered side. "No, Twilight, you won't be going this time." As he knew she would, she understood the meaning behind his words.

"Patience has never been one of my virtues, Jagur."

Feeling his lips starting to bend at the frustrated note in her voice, he fought it for a moment then let them bend, grinning down at such a witch of Power...pouting.

"There's a lesson waiting for that. Maybe you should learn it while it's still an easy one." Amber eyes held violet as he waited...for what, he wasn't quite sure.

She opened her mouth as if to say something and then shut it. There was nothing she could say to that. So, as was her way, she put it aside for further pondering and thought of what she needed to do in the next couple of hours before she went to bed for the night.

One breath at a time. Sometimes, that was all you could do. Just one breath at a time.

"One more question, Jagur. The others, the ones that had been so drained, are they well?" Stopping at the door, he turned, and the guarded look in his eyes as he glanced over her form, from head to toe, let her know that they lived.

She had done what he hadn't thought possible, what none of them had thought possible...and it made him wonder what the future held for this violet-eyed witch.

"Aye, Twilight, they all made it. They are still weak, and none of them have been able to call back their Power as Sheila did. But they will get better with time."

Nodding, she rolled onto her side away from him...she needed a few moments to digest what had happened.

\* \* \* \*

The door closed quietly, to be opened again a few minutes later, the edge of her bed dipping with a body's weight.

"Aidan said you were hungry." Loren. Spells...Melody!

Rolling over, she sat up to face Loren, who had also scrubbed up from the last time she had seen her. She was wearing a sundress that Raina hadn't worn in years. It was white linen with purple butterflies fluttering over a field of wild flowers.

"How is Melody?" Leaning forward, Loren wrapped her arms going around Raina's waist as she hugged her once hard, then sat back.

"She and the others will be fine. Hers was the worst of the wounds. Fala mended...my other two friends...while you worked on the abused ones. Oh, and we cleansed your loft."

"What happened?"

Loren knew that 'no bull' tone, knew that it meant Raina was out of patience two days ago...and also knew she was not the one that could tell her. "The others have already left for now. Since Aidan began it, he has the right to tell you the rest of their tale. Only then, can we tell you ours."

Raina had known from the very first time that she had met Loren that she was different. "But there is no extra line on your palm. I'd have seen it." Raina watched as Loren lifted her right hand, palm up between them. And whispered words in a language she didn't recognize, then blew lightly across her hand.

A spell of illusion, so simple yet so faint, the strength of Loren's own Power had made it invisible to all but those that searched for it.

Which Raina had never done...

And there was the extra line—between her fate and lifeline—riding deep and straight across her palm.

Taking Loren's left hand, she noted that there was no extra line on the hand that she was 'given', only the hand that she had 'chosen'.

Loren knew what Raina searched for and the answer to the question that lit her violet eyes. But she didn't know how much she could say without breaking her word.

"I was not born as I am now. The left hand, my off-hand, that holds what I was given at birth was dormant until the Goddess called me to her and woke the Gift within me."

Releasing her hands slowly, Raina spotted the food tray and took a piece of the still-warm garlic bread, popping it in her mouth.

"Vampires don't really hate garlic, do they?" Loren's lips bent in a grin as she shook her head, knowing where her thoughts had led her.

"No, not that I know of."

"You're not one, either. You and Jagur, and Melody are all the same, though, whatever that is."

Nodding, Loren knew she could say nothing more. "If you're up to it, Mickey and Catrina are downstairs running the front counter, but Lady knows on a Saturday night..."

"Yeah, we'd better get down there before all Hades breaks loose."

\* \* \* \*

"Morgan, where are they?"

Lang and Pack alike gathered beneath the black silk ceiling of Haven, the Loyal for the most part

gyrating on the dance floor to the dark Turkish beat as the Utameer looked around. Some in fascination, and some in quiet unease.

Morgan opened clouded green eyes as her black-clad body swayed among the silk pillows. Layla sat ready to catch her at her feet, as she watched the flame-haired beauty fall deeper into trance, becoming one with the Other.

"The dark things of Nothingness gather near Fat Man's Misery...in a cave that disappears with the tide." Aidan's leonine-colored eyebrow rose at the name of some fat man's misery...near the ocean?

"It's an overgrown trail in Torrey Pines. A sandstone ravine that's been closed down for years because it's unstable." Janel stood on the bottom step, not yet touching the rug-strewn floor below as she searched the faces about her in wonder, and a bit of fear.

She wore an off-white baby-doll top that gathered beneath her breasts and ended a few inches above her navel. A pair of faded blue jeans that sat low on her hips showed off her pierced navel ring twinkling silver in the club lights.

Copper hair brushed bare arms and shoulders as her head moved with her eyes, trying to figure out why her pack was gathered in a place she had only seen in dreams.

"Jagur?" He heard Aidan's question. But he had no more answer for it than any of them.

"I told her to stay with Loren. She must have tracked us from the Loft."

"Janel..." Evan stood beside the throne, his hand



gripping the wood until it creaked from the pressure.

"No, Evan..." Searching the burnt-wood eyes of his friend, he knew that Evan fought every instinct to go to her.

Silently, they both watched as Melody parted from the others and approached the stairs.

Aidan felt Melody touch Janel's mind if not the words as they spoke, Janel's copper head shaking as her eyes searched the familiar faces...and found him.

"Evan?" She shouldn't have recalled his name...

"Aidan?" He knew what Evan was asking. If he took her back now within their fold, she would never truly belong to the pack.

"No, Evan, she stays with the pack...at least until she is your equal and can choose of her own will." Evan's hands shook as he released the throne's back before he broke it.

"Then for Brighid's sake, send her away...because I can't," Evan whispered, his voice filled with unfamiliar agony.

Touching his friend's hand, he sent his Power across the room, lightly touching Janel's mind with a sleeping spell.

Melody caught her as she collapsed. A tall man with the same azure-eyes took the limp form from her, cradling Janel in his arms as he followed her up the stairs.

"Who is he?" Aidan understood Evan's tone...but it was Jagur that replied.

"He is Melody's brother. Soon to be one of the Tukcha. They will both take their totem forms under the coming full moon." Jagur kept his voice neutral and

low. Trying without success to ignore the pain and longing he felt radiating from the man that had given him Janel not so many nights ago.

"Those that become possessive of others don't live long, Evan. They die of broken hearts, or broken spirits. Remember that." Aidan caught Evan's dark gaze again, felt his Power ground, his eyes clear.

"And would you share your witch with another, Aidan?" Evan's words whispered over the crowd. Jagur turned to look at him, one black eyebrow arched in question, waiting for his reply.

Looking directly at Jagur, Aidan nodded his head. "Aye, I cannot tell her that I am the only one worthy of her love."

Jagur heard the truth in his words, but was not sure that he could say the same.

Aidan looked over the Gathering and the Utameer that stood among them. He saw their Power mingle with each other's like old friends, something in each of them recognizing something in the other.

Maybe they had more in common than they had been told...

Morgan continued to sway in front of Aidan, her arms rising above her head, looking much like the goddess chanting down the moon. She was neither Lang or Uta, yet never seemed to age. He had known her at least twenty years...

"The one that leads them is..."

"Enough! How do we know that she is not the enemy? She was there, in the woods..." Clío's finger pointed accusingly at Morgan as she collapsed to the pillows, Layla catching her as she fell.

All eyes turned to the Elder. She had been heralded as a goddess in the times of the Romans, brought most of the powerful into the Gathering. Her words held weight simply because they fell from lips that were sworn to speak only truth.

"Morgan does not hold the taint of one who has practiced the dark arts. You would know if she had taken Amber from us as surely as I would." Aidan's words rang true among them. She was not the one that they sought.

"Then who among us would know of such dark dealings? Who among the Practitioners would dare gather and rise up against us?"

Aidan didn't know the answer to her question, but he did know who could aid them. "Raina could find out." Aidan watched as Jagur quieted Melody's coming protest with a look. "She bears the mark."

There was only one mark that would denote knowing something of the dark arts. A crescent moon, declaring that she had walked through the darkness and found the light within her stronger.

Aidan stood, the Loyal on the floor all turning as did the Lang, his Power drawing their attention. "To fight evil, one must know evil. So said the Elders in the Burning Times. The truth behind those words has not faded."

Melody shook her head, stepping forward to stand in front of the tribe's leaders. "We cannot ask her..."

\* \* \* \*

The front room was filled to capacity, the tables

outside in front of the Loft packed, and the Library was being over-run by high school and college students.

It was true that finals were coming up, but it was a Saturday night. Most, if not all, were usually just stopping in for a cup of coffee and a snack on their way from a club or to an after-party.

And by the radiance of their auras, at least six of the younger crowd in the Library were cloaked to the nines. Their auras gave off no more than an ember's low glow in a sea of fireflies.

Finishing the frosting on the Kestrel's famed sugar cookies, she turned with the tray to place it on the counter and found a young man waiting patiently for her to notice him on the other side of the counter.

And the only reason she thought 'young man' was by the spark that she saw burning in his eyes. Most of the college students she had coming in were too burned out and were questing for the joy of life that they had lost as children. Or they knew how to mask it. But not this one...

There was a wealth of knowledge held in those hazel eyes.

Skin-hugging, black leather pants was paired with a long-sleeved, fishnet shirt that molded over his well-toned, at least six foot frame. Dark blue hair that couldn't be natural brushed against his shoulders. He would fit in more at Haven than the Loft, but they did migrate between the two.

Yet she had never seen this one...

"May I help you?" She had the sense that he was also not there for some of the cookies she set down in

front of him.

"I'm looking for my little sister." Okay, she was going to need a bit more info than that.

"And what's her name? What does she look like?"

He took a deep sigh. She noted the reluctance to speak further on his part, but didn't know how to...and it was as if he opened a door into his head, and she could see the person that he sought.

Long auburn hair, moss green eyes, beautiful...

*Rhiannon*... He whispered across her mind.

Power flared in the other room, as if he had shouted out her name and someone in the Library had heard him...but...

"Garret, she has no part in this play." They both turned their heads in the direction of the Library. Its doorway filled with a motley group of teenagers. Recognizable as a group by their Gothic fashion sense, and that each and every one of them was warded beyond reckoning. The leader was easily recognizable. He had an aura about him that reeked of superiority and was only seen just slightly less in his dark gray eyes. Standing slightly shorter than Garret, he was still above average. His dark purple hair caressed moon-pale cheeks and gray eye shadow. But what really caught her attention was the Power that swirled around him, tightly contained yet seemingly uncontrolled. A psychic vampire?

It took amazing amounts of energy to be able...

"She's my sister, Chris. You can't do this to her..."

As Chris left the doorway, Raina noted the strands of beads that fell across the opening try to cling to him as he passed...never a good sign.

"You're the one that started this, Garret, so don't go all self-righteous on me now..."

"Fuck you, Chris! The only thing I ever did was..."

"Enough!" Gods, did that come from her?

This Garret was somehow related to the six that had been searching for something in her Library for the past hour.

There was one spell that she had placed on the books within the Library, a cloaking spell that made things that should not be found overlooked by the seeker. They could be staring right at the book that they were looking for, and if their intent wasn't for further enlightenment but something non-altruistic, the books simply were not there, far beyond and beneath the notice of the seeker.

"I do not know what you search for, but you will not find it here," Raina told them softly.

Everyone in the front room had gone silent as they felt the Power building between the three actors in this scene. The Numb knew nothing more than a drama was playing out before them. But the Gifted felt the energy growing between them and were raising their shields just as quickly to avoid the backlash.

Where was Loren? Mickey and Catrina had left for a break, but shouldn't one of them...

"Stay out of this, witch. You have no idea..."

Spells, this Chris was a ballsy one, wasn't he? "Child, the Loft is mine, as are the books within it. So I suggest you and your friends try your luck at the local library, where the books aren't quite as particular as mine." She felt Garret take a deep breath,

Power surging all around him but trying to cloak her as well.

What did he think she needed protecting from?

And then it hit her shields, a blast of focused Power rolling through Garret's hastily erected barrier, but stopping dead at hers, the backlash knocking Chris back a step before he caught himself.

She was never without more shields, even in sleep, than most other Practitioners had up during a full casting. She'd needed to erect them young to keep her sanity and had been building them up for a lifetime.

Smiling, as a tiger might smile before it leapt on its prey, she ducked under the counter and started walking toward the purple-haired Novice.

"Walking or being carried, it doesn't matter to me. But you will leave...Now." The Power behind that last word, spoken so tonelessly, knocked Chris back the remaining step into his friends, and they kept going.

The group swiveled on their heels and took off. Their powder-pale faces and multi-colored hair disappeared down the hallway and out the back gate at a respectable run.

Following them at a slower pace, she cleansed her domain as she walked through the Library, down the hall and kitchen, until she reached the back gate.

But something nagged at the back of her mind, something familiar yet not so, but she couldn't place it...

A knock sounded at the back gate, startling her, before she opened it to find Daniel standing there with a sleeping girl in his arms.

"Raina, can Janel stay with you tonight?" Daniel had asked, but she knew there was only one answer that could be given. Already, she could see Janel and Daniel's Power mingling, forming a bond.

Even when the mind does not remember someone we have known in past lives, our spirit never forgets.

Interesting...

"Of course she can."

Desolation, an empty pain that burned you hollow, slapped against Raina's shields from the front room...goddess bless, the pain...

"Daniel, take her to my room and stay with her if you can. It can be frightening, waking up somewhere, and you don't know where you are..."

"Sure, Raina. Is everything okay?" But she wasn't listening to him, she had already turned and headed back toward the front room, her eyesight blurring as her third eyes slipped into place, opening to the reality that only some felt, and fewer ever saw.

Colors so vibrant she wanted to squint from their ferocity blazed all around her, from the silver that enshrouded the books and everything blessed within the Library. To the numerous auras that floated ghost-like around the room mingling with others of differing hues.

Deep blues swirled among gold and green. Scarlet and purple streaked with silver drifted against...goddess...such emptiness. A void of color stood outside the front door, reaching into the light of the Loft like some freezing bird caught in a storm beyond its control.

A black void of nothingness the likes of which she



had never seen until only a few days ago...and it had bled all over her clothes.

Focusing her physical eyes, drowning out the vibrant colors to more muted levels as if someone had put dark sunglasses over her gift, she blinked to finish clearing them...to be met by the loveliest moss green eyes, wide and innocent like a rabbit's, and just as hunted.

Auburn hair floated about her shoulders and down her back in soft waves, drifting over the pale cream cotton of the sundress that floated angelically about her body down to her ankles.

But she stood where the Nothingness had been, its absolute void of everything drawing the swirling colors about the room toward her like some black hole...

*Void of even her gifts...*

*Gods, just like Amber...but how?*

The young woman began shaking as Raina continued to stare at her, as if Raina was waiting for just the right moment to say, 'You are a damned creature...get from my sight!'

"You poor creature...come into the light." Raina knew that she should not invite this one into her Loft, that she was dark and...and wounded.

The Healer in her would let her do no less.

"If you are of good intent, enter freely..." The girl's short sob caught her off guard, pulling her out the door to the front of the store, watching as the girl, no more than sixteen or so, sat down shakily on one of the chairs and dropped her head wearily into her hands.

"God, if only I knew...if only I knew."

Knowing that all was not as it seemed but not heeding the warning that pricked the back of her neck, she kneeled down in front of the girl, her hands reaching out to touch her.

"No!" Jerking away, the sobbing girl leaned back as far as the chair would let her, the front legs rising precariously high off the ground.

"Whoa there, youngling, no one is going to hurt you here..."

"Things happen to those that touch me...just don't touch me."

Standing slowly, Raina took a step away from her, shifting her Sight once again to the third eye, confirming what she had first seen.

The girl was a veritable endless pit, even now drawing energy from what was released by those inside, swirling colors fading into her as they crossed the tiled patio and into...Nothing.

"Rhia! I need to...talk to you." The purple-haired one was jogging across the street, stopping as a car honked its horn, almost running him over.

*Don't let him take me...please...*

Startled, Raina glanced briefly down at the shivering girl who was even now getting ready to bolt.

*Don't worry, I'll help you...*

This creature was a void to everything but was still afraid enough to call upon some reserve to touch her mind. She was stronger than she appeared.

*Aidan...yes, she was somehow like him...*

But it seemed that Chris and his other friends had

doubled back, for the others were closing in fast, running down the street from both ends, fanning out to make it impossible for her to run.

Counting quickly, she noted that all six were there, which meant that the back was once again clear.

*Down the hall, through the kitchen, and out the back gate...go to Haven...they will help...*

Nodding that she had heard her, she took a deep breath...and bolted.

Gods, she could move...

"Rhia! Rhia! Come back here!" Swinging her body in front of the doorway just a second before they reached her, two boys with matching green hair slammed into her physically before they could stop.

Raina felt the blow but stood her ground, knowing instinctively that she protected more than an auburn-haired girl this night.

"I say who goes in and out of my Loft. You are not welcome."

"Chris, she's the one..." The moaned exclamation came from one of the boys in the back who was quickly stared into silence by the leader with the gray eyes, then Chris turned back to face her.

"You'll be sorry if you don't..."

Raina heard them, the chairs scraping along the hardwood floors and the footsteps as those within the Loft gathered behind her to stare at the six deviants standing outside of their Loft, threatening their Raina...

"Leave. Leave now, and never come back." Raina knew that everyone that had been in the front room now stood behind her, making it impossible to follow

the path the frightened girl had taken.

"Shit, Chris, let's just leave. We'll find her; we always do." Staring one of his followers into silence, Chris moved his venomous gaze over to Raina, a shiver of foreboding running down her spine.

"We'll meet again." Giving Raina one more hard look, he urged the others down the street, splitting up, three going in each direction.

If the auburn-haired girl could keep up that pace until she reached Haven, they would never catch her. She needed to tell Aidan about...what?

A light breeze drifted around her ankles as she watched them disappear into the darkness. And the familiar tugged at her once again.

"Do you smell it?" Raina turned to see Loren standing behind her right shoulder, her nostrils quivering as she took in one deep breath after another, closing her eyes as she sorted through the different smells that swirled in the evening breeze.

Musk and sandalwood, jasmine and honey...

Raina nodded her head, searching a slightly foggy brain for where she had smelled the familiar scents before. Spells, she felt as if her mind trudged through molasses, a fog rolling in over her mind like some sort of...spell.

"Bright blessings, Loren, something has been cast upon me."

*Aidan...*

Closing her eyes as a nauseous dizzying feeling rolled through her, she dropped to her knees. She felt Loren catch her, then Mickey, smelling of spiced chai and cookies, pulled her into his chest as they swept

past the crowd, through the Loft and into her Sanctuary.

They had moved much too fast. Raina hadn't even heard them go up the stairs, yet she could feel her quilt sagging beneath her as he laid her gently down upon the bed.

The soothing feeling of her wards pulsing with her heartbeat as they reached toward her, felt the spell, and instantly raised her casting shields about her second-story apartment.

She had never felt the like of it before, as if someone had put a straw into her soul and was sucking it dry.

Until she was Nothingness...goddess, was this what happened to that auburn-haired girl?

*No time for questions, my fair colleen. Master the one that tries to master you...*

*Luis? It feels...*

*Damn how it feels! You only have one choice to make if you want to keep your soul...*

It was the fear in his voice that began to strip away the feeling of lethargy and the truth ringing in his words that grounded the rest of her soul to her wards.

*They must have something of yours to focus on...it belongs to you...find it...*

Taking a step within herself, falling into the Healer's trance from one breath to the next, she walked within her lines of Power.

Everything that was touched by a witch in casting or blessing could be traced within these lines. That meant that any of those items could be used as a tool by those that practiced the dark arts, the Warlocks,

Oathbreakers, to focus a spell upon one of them.

It was why some Practitioners guarded their athames with such zeal. Where others, who were confident in their Power, sent their magic out into the world in the form of a blessed cookie shaped like a Kestrel.

As she walked the lines, each a varying shade of every color of the rainbow twining in and out of each other like some chaotic Celtic knot, she felt the pull that had once drained her tugging on that specific line, a brilliant wine red one that glittered with much love and good intent.

It seemed she needed to fine-tune her wards...

Sitting down, she touched the cord, felt it vibrating under her hand, filling her mind with a low hum as it trembled.

She could cut the cord, but if she did, she would not be able to trace it back to the person that had attacked her...the same person that had sent something to attack her the night that Sheila had found her way to the Loft.

The energy felt the same as it flowed now like a dark mist over the line, its hold becoming stronger every moment.

She was not one to run...she was a Healer, aye, but tonight she would take the role of Guardian. She could not allow any more to suffer.

Focusing on the line, she placed both hands upon it, grounded a lay line—an anchor to the other colorful cords of Power around her—and let her conscious fall into the flow.

It was a rapid ride, knowing that her spirit was

moving faster than any mortal thing could go. The ether blurred as she slammed through her wards and into the swirling mist that she saw as the astral plane.

Creatures of every shape, size and color blended into one as she was pulled past them, creating a prism of color all around her.

She could taste the darkness that seemingly gripped her hands, as it lead her further and further away from her physical body...and toward a gaping Nothingness.

Goddess Bless...

Putting on the astral brakes, she felt herself slow, her gifts literally over-Powering the Warlock on the other side.

She had only been a child, no more than ten, when she had first tasted the syrupy sweet taste of the 'dark side'. To say the least, she had found it lacking.

Commanding the Power that still tugged at her hands to stop, she felt it struggle beneath her open palms for a moment or two more before resting quietly against her wrists.

*Come out, come out wherever you are...*

Okay, she already knew she had an odd sense of humor.

Glancing around the gray of the ether, the black void of the Nothingness in front of her and the single red line of Power below her, she knew that she was being watched and that they were within the blackness. But she wasn't willing to risk rushing blindly into that void, not knowing if she could come out or not.

*I guess that means you want me to go and draw them*

*out?*

Looking up, she was slightly surprised when she saw the tall man standing in front of her. Long raven hair drifted down his back, a sharp contrast against the pale white of his skin...and violet eyes the same shade of twilight as her mother's.

He wore a black silk painter's shirt, ruffles falling down the front around the laces that held the shirt partially closed, showing a bit of the contoured and hairless chest beneath. Black leather pants, molded to his long muscled legs, stacking slightly at his ankles, and ending with biker boots.

She had seen him before, but never this clearly, as if she reached out, she would feel firm flesh and not the elements he was made out of.

He still reminded her of the elves she had often seen in paintings by Ruth Thompson. You could never mistake them for anything but masculine, yet there was an ethereal quality about them, as if they were made of fire and air instead of earth and water.

Goddess, and he was still as beautiful as the night she had created him.

*Could you walk into that black hole and return to me?*

*I could try...*

*Not good enough, Luis...*

*What other choice do you have? You've come this far. Either cut the cord and return to your body or face this unknown in its own place of Power...*

*And doing the latter could be committing suicide...*

*And doing the former would do nothing but save your ass and delay what this bastard has coming to it...*

He was right. But what if in that delay, it took



another life...

*If you go into that void, it's for certain it will...yours...*

*Raina...cut the line and return to me, Twilight...*

Jagur.

She could sense them now, standing beside her bed, sitting on her bed, a hip brushing against hers, focusing all of their Power on her, so as not to lose her.

*Come back, my little witch. We will find them soon enough...* Aidan.

She knew that they were right, but she also knew that she couldn't just cut the cord...not before she gave them a little of what they had been seeking.

Power...

Knowing that she would pay Karma for this if she did not will it to the gods, she opened her first chakra, the one that slept on the top of her head, and sent her intent to them for Their Will.

If They did not wish for what she was about to do to work, then it would not.

It was a request only a Guardian would make...one that she had only made once before...by harming another through magic to stop further loss of life.

For Life is Sacred...

Waiting, she sent out the witches' prayer, not really sure what she was waiting for or how she would know what to do. She knew the ways of the Guardians but had never been formerly trained or initiated into them.

She didn't have long to wait.

It began as a low humming that tickled the back of

her throat. She felt her vocal cords begin to tingle as the sound emanated from her voice box without her will. Growing louder, slowly building in octave and force until it sounded like someone was holding down the highest key on a million keyboards, piercing her astral ears with a numbing warmth. Her eyes were drawn to the red line of Power beneath her palms and began to focus that banshee wailing into the Nothingness.

The wail at first seemed to be absorbed by whatever was within that void, the Nothingness beginning to grow and pulse, until she felt a jolt of Power surge through her chakra, down into her vocal cords, and out her throat as a piercing silver light. Bending her spine with the force of it, seizing her body as every muscle tensed with the Power that flowed through her...and shattering the void into a trillion tiny shards that seemed to dissipate into the ether.

Collapsing, she felt the line sever as the wailing stopped, then her spirit jerking back at a blurring speed to her body.

\* \* \* \*

*Aidan...*

Taking a deep breath, he sat forward on the throne, his hands gripping the carved sides until the wood began to creak.

*Raina...what's wrong?*

Searching his mind, he could not feel her, like a second heartbeat that had once shadowed his own

was gone.

"Jagur, she's in trouble." Jagur didn't need him to specify who 'she' was; knew it bone-deep and soul-weary as he, too, had heard her call out to Aidan...as all of both Tribes within a hundred miles had heard her.

What was this new link that connected them?

The pack was the first to move as their forms blurred with shifter speed. Those of the Lang simply faded into the numerous shadows beneath the black silk ceiling, becoming one with them, traveling at the speed of Night.

Aidan felt his body shift into a thing of air and smoke as he moved within the darkest of the shadows, the lights of the club all turning off with a thought, inciting startled cries of those from the upper levels that could not see in the pitch-blackness that surrounded them. One of the Loyal would turn them back on in a minute or so, more than long enough for the Pack to leave unseen, and the Lang to make the shadows of the streets outside.

When walking within the shadows, his physical senses turned off, and he was completely Gift-led.

He saw with his third eye, heard with Telepathy, felt with Empathy. The shadows were extremely seductive, like a warm wind washing over your mind. More than one of his kind had chosen to remain a creature of Shadows after they had seen a few thousand millennium; among their kind it was known as a kind of enlightened existence.

Down the street, he could hear the voices of a million people, their thoughts all rolling across his

senses as he searched for one in particular.

*Raina...*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**H**er heartbeat was the first thing she became aware of, a little too fast for her liking but strong and steady.

The second things she noted was the Power that was flowing over and into her, like a warm velour blanket, rubbing the inside of her body, curling around her chakras...

*Aidan...*

*Hmmmm?*

*I saw the ones that took Amber, and I think I know how they're doing it...*

*Rest easy, Twilight. Even now, the Utameer follow their scent, and the Lang follow their stolen Power. We will have them before the dawn...*

*But...there was someone else, guiding them, controlling them...making them do things that they wouldn't normally do. And I think I just killed him...*

"You're drained, Raina. Your first act as a Guardian was also as an Avatar for the gods' will. Some have gone crazy from the sheer Power that was passed through them; others simply never made it back to their physical forms."

Opening her eyes, she was struck by the pure beauty of the creature before her.

His Power so tightly controlled around him. Walls so high, it must have taken lifetimes to build them. But then again, he'd probably had lifetimes...

"Show me, Aidan."

It wasn't a request, yet it wasn't quite a command. A part of him wanted to balk at a mortal, witch or not, using that tone of voice with him. But it was the questioning of her sanity that he saw in her eyes. She had to know if what he had shown her as they walked the dream paths had been real.

Lifting his upper lip with the tip of his index finger, he thought of her as he had been with her in the realm of her mind and felt the fangs slip from the cavern they rested in, lengthening as she watched.

Raina knew she had been high-handed with him. Felt his umbrage at her demand, but he had done as she requested. Not because he had to, but because he had wished to please her?

Reaching up, she caressed the hand holding the upper lip back and then lightly touched the fang.

"They're like a cat's claws..." Releasing his lip, he caught her fingertip between his lips, kissing it lightly, before pulling away.

\* \* \* \*

Chuckling as what she had said settled into his mind, he shook his head and grinned at her, the fangs having slipped back into the gums to simply look like very sharp canines.

"Never compare a Lang to a cat, Raina. That's more Vanir than Langlolawk."

She only recognized one of the foreign sounding words. "Vanir...as in the Vana-gods, the second generation of shape-shifting Nordic gods

He was impressed. Many knew of Loki, Freya, Odin and Thor, but not so many knew of what they were.

"They are all Utameer, first children of the gods."

"Are, as in, still here?"

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he touched her jaw lightly, caressing skin that would one day lose its youth... "I've gotten ahead of myself. This really would be best left to Clio, she tells our history to all that are Awakened."

Grabbing his hand, she sat up, her once-exhausted form filled with the energy of curiosity. She was a Leo after all..."Oh no, Aidan, you are not leaving it at that!"

Sighing lightly in relief, he knew that she would be well now. That the danger had passed.

Her Na-meer was even now soaking in her bathtub with two of his kind pouring energy into him as if he were parched desert soil, drawing off the many stones she had placed on the counter to cleanse. The witch collected Power without even knowing it, or the why of it. But it was being put to good use now.

They had shoved their Power down her chakras; Aidan, Jagur, Layla, and Loren, not willing to let her slip away after she had called down the wrath of the gods on whatever was behind that Nothingness.

But Aidan and Layla could draw off of all those

people below them in the Loft, while Loren and Jagur had refused such 'Vamping', preferring to recharge in other, less Lang-ish manners.

"Patience, Raina; it is something you are going to have to learn..."

*Rhiannon...*

Sitting forward, she searched for a sense of the girl and felt her fear. Like a sick, coiling thing in the bottom of her stomach.

She was not at Haven.

\* \* \* \*

She didn't know why she had gone to the Kestrel's Loft. It was like she had been drawn there, the feeling that she was going in the right direction for the first time in months easing the constricting fear around her heart.

It had all begun when she had met Garret's friend, Chris.

Garret was the rebellious older sibling, hanging out with people that scared the crap out of her parents, listening to dark Goth Industrial music and dressing like a modern day Lestat...but none of that had ever bothered her.

He was her big brother, had always loved her, looked out for her...never thought she was a freak.

She was what the doctors called 'Delusional'. Her parents called her 'special', and the kids at school, well, those words were better left unthought...because words had Power. Not the 'pen is mightier than the sword' kind, but the 'killing-words from



Dune' kind.

It had all started about two years ago at the lovely age of fourteen, when puberty hit.

She had always been a bit different, set apart from the others somehow, and they all instinctively knew it. Rhiannon wasn't going to grow up and be a doctor or a lawyer, though she had been smart enough. It was just that the materialistic culture she had grown up in held nothing for her.

It had started with the Dreams, of creatures she knew she had never met outside of a fairy tale. Some had moon-pale skin with silver hair and wings like a swan's, stretching out toward the heavens.

Others could slip in and out of shadows, dance within the flames and not get burned as they called Fire to their bidding.

Some could shape-shift into all different kinds of animals and plants. Communing with all Creation as if they were one with the Mother.

And then there were those that worked with water. Calling rain to feed dry fields, moving rivers to their will, helping the shape-shifters nurture what they had created.

And then there were those that could call more than one element to their bidding, and even less that could call three. But in just a rare few, creatures blessed by their gods...they could commune with all four.

They were the Sacred, Avatars of the gods...

Each night the dreams came, playing out a bit more, their world becoming more and more her world until she was sleeping whenever she wasn't

standing.

And then she could be walking down a hallway and see what was going on around her, but she wasn't there, not really.

Her grades dropped; her parents noticed the change. That's when the doctors told her she was nuts...in medical terms. Escapism, Delusional, etc, etc.

What she didn't tell them was that she was beginning to hear their thoughts brushing past her mind like soft whispers, broken in the beginning and slightly fuzzy, until she learned to tune-in, like a radio station, to just their frequency.

And that was when she heard the doctor's subconscious thoughts, the ones that wanted to beat her until she admitted that it was all a dream or run away from the creature that sat before them.

They either feared her, whether they knew it or not, or wanted to use her for some book they were always working on. That was when she stopped going.

And her brother gave her a book.

He had been listening to her, whether it had looked like it or not, teenage boredom and all that, and some of what she said seemed to click with him, too.

He had borrowed it from his friend, Chris, who she knew of but had never met.

Where he had gotten the book, she had no idea. When she had touched the cover, a jolt had shot through her system, lighting a place that had been dark within her and setting her on the path that she was now.

It was a rough translation of some Norse carvings called 'Emblah's Creed'. It spoke of the Vanir, children of the gods—shape-shifters, fire-callers, storm-bringers, ocean kings. They were the creatures from her dreams.

And of a spell called 'Loki's Blessing'. A spell that gave mortals the ability to become more like the gods in Power. But there was a hitch. Power should not be taken, only given.

She had been curious. A part of her needed to be closer to the creatures she saw in her dreams, and she thought that maybe this would awaken something in her. Answer the questions that had been running through her mind.

So she had cast the spell, walked down the hall, and touched their dog...and he'd passed out asleep.

A flicker of Power passed through her, more like a tease, making her want to taste it again, and before she knew it, she was crossing the hall to her brother's door, wanting to tell him of what she had just done.

Her brother opened the door at her knock, and she'd seen him sitting on the floor by the bed, his dark purple hair sweeping over his black-clad shoulders. Stormy gray eyes widening with both surprise and approval when he spotted her.

And she'd wanted him. In that instant, she knew she would call Power from him, and he would let her.

And he did...and it was sweet...and he didn't wake up for three days.

He'd taken her virginity the night he'd woken in her brother's bedroom, while Garret had gone out to get them something to eat and her parents were at

some charity gala.

And it hurt like hell...

But for the first time, she was with a guy who didn't think she was a freak and thought she was beautiful.

And he said he loved her. Knew it the moment he saw her standing in the doorway. And maybe he had. But uncontrolled Power corrupts the user, bends it to one simple goal...to get more.

They had all gone out that night, caught up with his other friends, and went to the beach.

They all tried the spell, but none of them could call the Power. It seemed it was one of her Gifts, as Chris had called it. And she had become a goddess to them, she who could call the Power and feed it to them.

At least she had thought she was the only one that could do it.

Both Garret and Chris had the gift as well, though the spells in the book seemed to work for her the best, as if part of the deal was you had to be a chick to use them.

One night, when they were all hanging out in Dead Man's cave, Chris had brought them Amber. Drained...he had learned how to take what was only to be given. On some kind of mad high as he brushed up against her as she walked down the beach and needed more.

And she faintly remembered a word from the book she had read, and it echoed through her mind until she had a sour taste in her mouth and a sick heart.

Oathbreaker...

But he had radiated with Power, and the others

had gone to him like drug addicts wanting their next fix, but he denied them. He did not share.

She had left then, stumbling out of the cave as the high tide began to wash in to all but the highest chamber in the sandstone cliff.

And they had let her go. They had a new god now...one that was going to make them all gods.

She didn't see Garret for a week, until just a few nights ago, when he and Chris had come to the house, asking her to go out with them, that the gang had been asking about her...that he loved her...

And, fool that she was, she'd gone.

They'd hung out downtown in the Gaslamp for a while, acting as it had been in the beginning. When she asked them what happened, they said it was over, that they had let the girl go and learned to draw off crystals and storms. And she'd believed them.

They'd asked her if she wanted to see, up in the mountains where they had been drawing from ancient rocks and trees, and she'd said yes.

They could have called her freak for all she cared. She had been so lonely without her brother...and Chris.

And that was when she found out they had been lying.

They were keeping these dark, drained creatures in the basement of an old dwelling of some sort in the forest.

They never moved, just sat there against the walls, willing to do just about anything for a drop of Power, slaves to it...for all of theirs was gone.

They were these voids...just husks of flesh,

breathing, but their Power was gone, and she hoped to Freya that their souls had long ago left their bodies.

He was radiant that night, Chris, with this Power surging through him, barely controlled, as if he'd bitten off more than he could handle.

She'd been yelling at him about what he had done, what he was doing, an Oathbreaker, and the Laws she had read in the book, and he'd just dropped to the ground.

The energy she saw swirling around him was just gone...and it had taken most of his as well with it.

She'd kneeled down, and he'd grabbed her hand...gods, the pain...like pulling her skin from her body, but he wouldn't let go...

Garret had torn her away from Chris as the others took off, knowing something that she didn't. But he had dropped her, as if she had burned him, for she'd been drained so dry, that for preservation's sake, she had latched onto him, trying to fill the void that she now felt where her gifts had been. As if she were suddenly without her five senses all at once.

Garret swore to her he hadn't known, that he had in fact been staying at the beach, drawing off the ocean's inexhaustible force and the occasional drunken frat party near the cave.

Chris hadn't told him what they had been doing, only that they had found a new source of Power as he had...and he had thought...well, he'd been wrong.

They took off as well, Garret's Jeep tearing down the dirt road and out of the mountains, speeding toward the ocean so that she could draw off of it as he did.

But when they got there, she couldn't do it. It was as if Chris had stolen the essence of her gifts, so that they could not be charged. They were just...gone.

Garret had hugged her, knowing what would happen. She'd taken until he'd passed out and then ran...

She didn't know why she was going south. Back toward the Gaslamp, but something was drawing her there...and an instinct was better than nothing at all.

It was only twenty miles, but the beach didn't go the whole way there, and she was moving so slow. She didn't remember much until Saturday night, almost two days later, when she was standing outside the Kestrel's Loft. Whatever voice that had been guiding her stayed true.

And then she had seen her...the witch that glowed with a silvery light. That immediately brought a thirst to her starving spirit. Just standing outside the Loft seemed to make her feel stronger, though she wasn't sure why. Garret had been there...and the others.

She had watched as the witch with the sable hair had overpowered Chris and the others. She'd hidden in the shadows when Garret had left, crossing the street and going into the pub there.

But the witch's Power called to her, like a song of salvation...she knew this woman could help her.

And now she was running again, for the club called Haven. She had never been there. But anyone who had been to the Gaslamp heard the whispers, saw the line that always ran around the building every night of the week.

If her parents knew where she was going...Hades,

what she had done...they would never forgive her.

And Garret, could she trust him again? How could he not have known? Or maybe it was just that he hadn't wanted to know.

The gray-tinted colors of night sped past her as she made a mad dash for the club a few blocks away. She couldn't recall ever moving this fast before, as if a part of her had shifted, becoming one with the shadows as she dodged around people, sometimes running in the middle of the street, a dark blur past open windows.

She could see the line ahead of her, but there was a commotion at the front. The bouncers had left the door, simply closed up shop, and everyone was wondering what was going on.

No...she had to get in!

"Rhia love, come on. Garret is hurt; he needs you." Davis, one of the green-haired twins, was standing a few yards away from her, his hands out in front of him as he walked toward her. He had always been one of the quieter ones in the group. But where he went his brother was sure to follow...

Arms wrapped around her waist from behind and picked her up off her feet as she started to struggle. The people in the line just stood there, watching the drama play out before them.

It was an odd thing about downtown society; you just simply did not get involved in other peoples drama.

Letting out a scream, she watched as everyone around her covered their ears, as car alarms started going off up and down the street and in the distance



dogs began to howl.

Davis's brother, Duncan, dropped her as he went to cover his ears, her throat on fire as she continued to scream, but it was more like a projection of sound coming from her soul now than something coming from her vocal cords.

Cocking her arm back, she threw a wild punch into Duncan's face, feeling his nose crack beneath her fist. Turning, she brought back her foot and slammed Davis in the balls with a kick some football players would be proud of, full extension.

Rhia felt like she was about to shatter as the banshee wailing stopped. She began to run again, back toward the Loft. Back to the witch that she should have stayed with...for it seemed the ones she had been sent here to, were gone.

Moving even faster than before, her body slipped into the shadows as she ran. She felt a warm hand on her shoulder that seemed to give her strength, but she couldn't see anything...

*They're ahead of you, on your right...cut back through the alley, little one...*

Not knowing why she trusted that whisper that felt so familiar, she did as he said and found herself at the back gate to the Loft.

Opening the gate, she closed it quietly behind her as she slipped into the darkness of the kitchen.

"I knew you would come back here." Chris!

*Lady love me, Lord protect me, your child, in this, my time of need...*

"Shit!" She heard his footsteps as he jumped back from her. He'd been right beside her, yet she hadn't

seen him in the inky black of the kitchen. The door to the hallway was closed, sealing off the light from the Library.

"What the fuck did you just do? It doesn't matter...Rhia, let me call Power for you. Let me help you." She could feel his breath, brushing across her forehead as the smell of something dark and metallic swept past her on the night breeze.

"You'll never be able to call the Sacred; the gods have forsaken you." The kitchen lit with an eerie blue flame. The glass that held the candle glowed a bright azure in the darkness.

"I told you, witch, this doesn't concern you. Rhia and I..." The flame vanished, pitching them back into darkness.

A low growl and the shifting of the air in front of Rhia was the only indication that something was near her. But she had the feeling that, whatever it was, wasn't about to bring out the whoop-ass down on her.

The next moment, the room was filled with a multitude of sounds- rending of clothing, the swish of a blade moving through the air, flesh pounding into flesh, and a body thudding onto the floor.

It was too dark. There should have been a glow of starlight in the room, or from under the door, but there was nothing, just the inky black void as if she was blind...

Freya! Was she blind!

And just as she was beginning to panic, the room was once again naturally dark, the shadows and outline of the things within it easily seen to her

dilated pupils.

And there was Chris, on the floor. A man in all black with light-colored hair standing over him, and an athame in his hand. And the witch, the one she somehow knew was called Raina, standing at his head as she looked down at him.

"Speak the truth, and he will spare you. Lie, and you die." There was no regret in her voice, yet no triumph either...just simple truth.

\* \* \* \*

Shaking the dark purple locks of hair out of his eyes, Chris tilted his head back to stare at the beauty standing over him. She had Power. True Power, not the kind that was taken. "I'll answer your questions if you will answer only one of mine."

Raina stared down at the young man lying at her feet, numerous cuts on his side and hands making his sweat-soaked shirt stick even more to his chest. "All right then, Novice, you first."

Closing his eyes, he had to concentrate, forcing his third eye to see the beauty cloaked in Power that glowed with a silvery light above him. But he already knew what he wanted to ask her.

"How. How did you become what you are without taking from others?" It was not what she had expected him to ask.

Raina looked out the window into the cool-tiled patio, the fountain's tinkling drifting on the wind through the door.

"Birth-right. Love. Respect. Honor."

Shaking his head, he didn't understand. "But..."

Shaking her head in turn, she pointed her finger at his forehead as she stared him down. "Where did you learn how to take Power? To become what you are now."

Shrugging his shoulders, he hissed as it stretched one of the wounds in his side. "A book called Emblah's Creed." Thinking these would be some of his last moments in this life, he sought Rhia out in the dark with his eyes, remembering the first time her had seen her.

He had loved her in that moment...

"And where did you get the book?" She couldn't believe it. Who had he killed to get one of the three copies of that sacred text?

"E-Bay."

Oh, for the love of..."E-Bay! You bought one of the most powerful books in all spellldom on a freaking Internet auction site?"

Nodding, he focused once again on the woman above him. The man standing over him was Death walking in the flesh...if he focused on him, he was gonna shit his pants.

He opened his mouth, as if he was going to answer that rhetorical question, when she slashed her hand through the air, making him close his mouth.

"And in this book, it told you...that you could take another's Power against their will?"

Chris shook his head, trying to search his memory, if the book had ever... "Well, it said in Loki's Blessing, the spell that started it all, that you should be given Power. But I don't recall it ever saying that

you couldn't just take it. Only that it would be rude."

\* \* \* \*

"Rude! Try the most dishonorable act among our kind! Try Oathbreaker! Try Warlock. Try..."

"Major Karmic debt." Aidan had been quiet for so long, Raina had almost forgotten he was there. There was a darkness surrounding him, waiting...waiting to be set free.

"Gods, Chris, do you have any idea what you've done? You've set the world of magic on its freaking ear, just because no one ever told you that it wasn't possible to do it." She had begun pacing at the beginning of that tirade, and by the end she was throwing her hands up in the air, as if asking the very gods for patience.

He was a dead man. Not by Raina, but by Aidan's kind, or Jagur's kind. He was a dead man, unless...

"Give it back, Chris. Give it all back."

A shudder ran through him, starting at his heart and working outward with those eight toneless words. Karmic debt was a bitch, because incurring it meant you had done something pretty nasty to start with. He had not only stolen Power, he'd let some be killed...

"I didn't kill them, if that's what you're thinking. Duncan was always a bit of a sadist. When he started taking Power, it was like it brought out the very worst in him. This homicidal nutcase...but I thought I could control him."

And Bright Blessings, his words rang with the

silvery tone of redemption.

"By the gods, he's telling the truth." Aidan sounded just as amazed as she felt.

He was a monarch that had abused his reign, true, but he hadn't gone all Inquisition on them.

Then where was...

A wave of pain slammed across her senses as they heard something upstairs hit the ground...hard.

\* \* \* \*

Jagur had been listening to the sweet cadence of his Twilight's voice from her bathroom, when, even in his drained state, he had felt her fear.

Telling Loren and Melody to stay inside by a single look, he felt Raina and Aidan leave the room, then the apartment, before he was out of the deep bathtub, passing by the spare bedroom, he made sure that Janel was sleeping, and shifting to one of his most familiar totem forms...the puma.

Dark golden fur covered him as he slid into this form like a familiar glove, easing from man to cat in a single breath from generations of practice.

Shifting took a great deal of energy, but it also opened them to the lay-lines of Power within the earth that in human form they did not as easily draw upon.

When they shifted to one of their totems, they were no longer Utameer, no longer Jagur; they were one with Creation...and the Power that drove it.

Padding down the hallway, he saw Daniel ahead of him walking out the door to follow them, and then a

fist knocking him in the back of the head.

And that fist connected with the other arm that caught the body before it dropped to the ground. And a companion to that fist pulled an athame from...

Letting out a low growl, he sprang, mouth open, and caught the wrist of the hand holding the blade in his mouth. His jaw clamped down with unnatural force, as the bones crushed between his teeth.

The little green-haired mortal let out a gasp from the pain before fainting, while his mirror image with matching green hair held Daniel in front of him, an athame to his throat.

"I've heard of you, kitty. You're one of Amber's pack. Eric's, too. But they couldn't stop us, and neither can you." What the hell was this? Homicidal Dr. Suess?

And then he caught it, the scent that was so familiar, clawing at the back of his mind.

Amber. He was the one that had taken Amber's third eye. He smelled of her blood. He was the one that had taken her life as well.

Dead man walkin'...

Jagur circled around the Oathbreaker. The green-haired Warlock kept Daniel between them at all times, his blade cutting lightly into his skin and causing a dark line to appear down the front of his throat.

Daniel opened his eyes just a fraction. He was awake. That was all that Jagur had been waiting for.

Springing in a blur of motion, Daniel grabbed the hand holding the blade and jerked it away from his throat, then slid to the ground just as Jagur flew over

him, tumbling them both to the ground and hitting hard.

Teeth descending for the warlock's throat... something made him stop and draw away.

*See you again soon, Na-meer...if not this lifetime, then the next... Eric.*

*We are never further than a thought, big brother...be happy... Amber.*

Sitting back on his haunches, he closed his eyes as tears of both joy and sorrow slid down his furred cheeks.

*Be well my little ones...be well...*

\* \* \* \*

Aidan was gone from one blink to the next. Up the stairs and into the darkness.

Raina followed him as fast as she was able, her athame's rowan handle lightly glowing against her skin.

*Please let them be safe...please let them be safe...*

And she knew that she would not like what she saw when she slammed open the purple door. The metallic smell of blood was everywhere...her white floral tiles, black with it.

"Jagur!"

"Is fine. But I don't think the other one was so lucky." Daniel was standing by the door to her apartment. One of the Goth kids with the green hair was passed out at his feet, his wrist bending at a wrong angle.

And then she saw him. The large mountain lion,



sitting beside the dead body with his head hanging down against his chest.

"Jagur?" She knew it was him. As she would recognize him in any form, in every lifetime. And this one seemed to suit him...

Walking slowly across the tiled rooftop patio, skirting around the patches of blood here and there, she kneeled down next to him. The lifeless body beside him had a desecrated athame buried deep in his chest.

Reaching out a hand, she touched his furred cheek, watching as his blue-amber eyes opened, misted with tears.

He barely had a drop of blood on him. But the patio was covered with it. Where had it all come from?

Raina bit back a scream as a body fell off her roof, and three slightly demented females let out a hoot of laughter. Looking down at the crumbled form, she knew it was his pain that she had felt...

Garret.

Jagur was at her side one moment and gone the next. The only thing she knew was that there could be no more death.

"Don't kill them!"

But Jagur didn't seem to be listening, or Aidan. He was a Guardian of a sort, if not a dark one...but...

Jagur leapt onto the roof, faster than her eyes could follow him, and then one of the girls was falling from above her and landing next to Garret, her ragged breathing the only indicator that she still lived.

An athame came flying down next, cracking the tile

it hit in half. Then another girl, this one having both arms at unworkable angles as they tangled in her jet-black hair.

The third came down screaming, but stopped when her head hit the tiled floor. Raina was expecting a broken neck, but something had pulled her back at the last moment, before dropping her to the ground.

Aidan...

"As you requested. Not dead. But when the Tribes finish with them, they'll wish that you had not been so merciful."

Garret's chest rose a fraction of an inch as Power flowed around and then into him, returning to its master. But it would not be enough to remove the death shroud she felt beginning to cover his spirit.

"God, no! Garret!" Rhiannon.

"Shite, where is..." Raina started.

"Right here." Chris came out of the dark stairwell, touching Rhia's shoulder lightly as he passed, Power flaring between the two of them as he returned what he had taken from her before coming over to them.

"Can you save him, Healer?" Chris knelt down beside his best friend's body, the madness of uncontrolled Power and the release of some dark sway over his soul forever extinguished at the sight of his best friend lying on the floor.

"Truthfully, little Novice, I can only try."

Raising his gray gaze to the silvery crescent in the sky, his eyes matched the clouds rolling in on the western horizon. He knew the first debt he would pay. And it would be for betraying Garret.

Stretching out beside his friend, he placed one arm

beneath Garret's head and his other across Garret's chest, resting his hand over his heart.

"I give you freely all that I am and ever will be..."

The black void that was Garret recognized the words somewhere deep in his unconscious state and grabbed a hold of his friend like a drowning man. Pulling all that he was, ever had been, ever would be...their souls twining...they were going to pass into the next life together.

And then they heard it...the chanting, one ancient name after another as those above them called upon all faces of the goddess to plead for their lives.

*Isis Astarte Diana Hecate Demeter Kali Inana...*

*Have you learned your lesson, little ones?...*

It was two voices, both masculine and feminine that spoke as one.

The female's tone was chiding, while the man's was more hopeful.

*That we can only be what we are?* Chris asked.

*And what are you, little ones?*

*We are all connected...the storms, the mountains, magic, souls...we are one,* replied Garret as he struggled to clear his thoughts.

*One of what?* They could hear the knowing in Their voices, but for Their own reasons, it seemed that They wanted to hear Their children say it.

*One with you...* Chris and Garret said in unison.

*Life is Love, and Love is Sacred...Honor the Sacred, my little lost ones, and find redemption for your acts in the arms of the ones that you have caused such pain...*

*But if you knew...Why did you let us?*

*How can you ever learn the answer, if we take away the*

*question...*

Raina heard the words of the Other, as did every mind, conscious or not. As did every creature- shifter, wind-rider, flame-dancer, storm-caller within their plain of existence. They fell to their knees, as the gods' words caressed their minds for the first time since their banishment.

For one reason or another, the gods had chosen once again to speak to their children directly, as it was told of in the Beginning when all Creation was still new and vibrant.

Honor the Sacred...not Protect...maybe it was the same thing.

Leaning over the two young men, Raina saw their Power pulse around them, matching the slow beating of their hearts as their chests rose and fell in tandem.

*Light and Dark, Night and Day. What made one go mad for the taste of Power, while the other turned to the oceans and the earth?*

"Because one is Langlowlawk, and one is Utameer." Aidan knelt down beside her. The urge to lean into his warmth and take comfort in his touch almost overwhelmed her. Sensing her need, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to his side.

"What do you mean, Aidan? They don't feel like you and the others."

"Not yet they don't. They have yet to Awaken." She had heard him use that term before. When they had been talking about the Tribes.

"Awaken as in 'come into the Power'?" It was a term used by the Craft for those that first become aware of their Gifts. For most, right around puberty.

For her...she was around thirteen months.

"Something like that, Twilight. But it's for neither here nor now." Jagur had taken his birth form again, his only clothing a towel that Loren had brought out to him.

Aidan still wore her 'Magic Happens' T-shirt, and as she looked between the two, tears misted her eyes. She knew that she still loved Jagur, but she had fallen for Aidan as well. And she didn't know...

"Easy, Raina, no fears. We'll figure out this dance as we go." Jagur had come to kneel at her other side as Aidan tried to ease her by simply being there.

"What are we going to do with them?" Rhia stood on the outskirts of the group, her arms the only thing holding her shaking form together.

And it was then that Raina saw it, the Power that flowed so closely to her body, tightly controlled.

"Aidan, she's like you...still sleeping, but like you." Aidan nodded as he stood. The little purple-haired Oathbreaker and Rhia were reincarnations of the original Lang. Those that had fought the first Utameer and been cast from the grace of the gods.

"They will come with me. Garret will go with Jagur, and these others will be turned in by Detective Warren who will single handedly have discovered the killers...with a bit of guidance from the local witch."

Jagur stood as well, offering Raina his hand as she got up off the tiled floor. She took it, holding it for a moment, nodded her thanks, and released it.

They had both felt the pull as their Power brushed against one another. Yet they said nothing.

"But won't they say something about Chris?"

Shaking his head, Aidan walked over to each of the unconscious forms and touched their very warped minds.

"Not now, they won't."

Daniel was on the phone in the kitchen, calling in a few officers he had gone through the Academy with and knew would have no problem with the notion of him single-handedly taking down five killers on Raina's roof.

They didn't call him Clark Kent for nothing.

But the blood was going to have to be cleaned up...

Heading for the kitchen, she stopped at the purple door as Power flared behind her for only an instant, and a warm hand touched her shoulder. Power, tightly leashed, rolling down her arm.

"No worries, my little witch, the blood is gone."

Turning, she looked out over the gleaming white floral tiles of her patio, not a drop of blood remaining to stain the tiles black in the moon's pale light.

Jagur, Garret, Rhia and the others were gone as well. The still-unconscious bodies of the four remaining Oathbreakers were neatly stacked against one another, back to back, to keep them sitting somewhat upright. And Daniel's voice could be heard drifting out from the kitchen. The dead one lay where he had fallen on his blade.

"Is that it, then, Aidan? Do I wake up in the morning, wondering if this was all a dream? Or are you going to be there beside me?" She could sense words springing to his tongue, but he didn't speak them.

So that was it...

Running a hand roughly through his hair, he searched the sky for a moment, before finding her eyes once again.

"I have not put another's happiness before my own in some time, Raina. Give me but a moment to accept it." Closing her eyes, she felt her heart clench, feeling the words she knew were coming as surely as the sea did a storm.

Damn the man...vampire...Lang...

"Don't you even think about trying to spell me to sleep and forgetting I ever met you." Taking his face in her hands, she leaned forward and rubbed her nose across his lightly, their eyes holding with the soft caress.

"I don't know what you are yet, Aidan, or what path you walk. But I do know that my life would be emptier without you in it."

\* \* \* \*

Pulling her to him, he settled his arms around her waist as her head rested on his shoulder, their heartbeats becoming one as he took in her scent. The way the moonlight played across her skin, the dark shadows of her hair.

How could he tell her that he suspected she was Aauki? What the Utameer called 'god-touched'. A creature that was called Sacred because they could call the four elements to their bidding. They were both Utameer and Langlowlawk, Avatars of the gods.

It was two creatures like her, so many eons ago, that brought about the fury of the gods. A creature

that had brought about some of the greatest wars and desolation throughout Human history...as well as some of the greatest leaders of all time.

There were those that would want to use her for her gifts. And there were those that would use any means to try and take them...or kill her for them. She would be feared by those that did not know her and revered by those that did...

"I hog the covers."

\* \* \* \*

Raina leaned back to see his face, not at first understanding what he said, then letting out a short bark of laughter when she did. "Then you'll stay with me tonight? And see where future sunsets lead us?"

Her life, spells, her entire view on reality was going to change in the near future. So it kind of hit her as odd that having this man sleep beside her tonight was so important. She only knew that it was.

She would never be able to say for certain that he would be there the next morning, or the one after that. But she had him for this one. And for now, that felt like enough.

She would deal with shape-shifters, vampires, Oathbreakers, and a slew of other altering elements in her life with the dawn.

Nodding his head slowly, he kissed her softly on the forehead, before easing her head back against his shoulder.

"As you wish..."



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**V**ampires, shape-shifters, ghosts...they have always fascinated me.

My passion for history and religions, past and present, weave within my words. Tales of lovers finding each other in future lives, shape-shifters stalking those that had violated the weak, protecting the innocent...

So now, I write what I dream, what I've seen, and what I know bone deep and soul-weary to be true...you are never alone.