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Darragha Foster, Tina Holland, Celine Chatillon

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Polishing Saber

Darragha Foster

Dedication

For Thordur Bjorn Sigurdsson, who helped me understand the importance of holding Iceland's wilderness areas sacred. And for the pilot who pierced my ear with a straight pin in a four-seat puddle jumper, over the Arctic Circle, Grimsey, Iceland, in 1979.

This tale is a compilation of Icelandic folk legends, actual historical events and sheer flights of fantasy on my part. I hope the Hidden Folk don't mind too much.—Darragha

Prologue

Gisli cursed under his breath at the opening of the clay tomb found buried in a niche in the cliffs by an eiderdown gatherer. It was a remarkable find. One with dire consequences. He had long rued the day; he'd wished for it never to come. He had thought the item well-hidden. He had been entrusted to preserve it as a reminder of the great war between the Hidden Folk and the witches; it stood as a silent memorial in hopes that such wickedness would never live to serve and control humankind again.

The Old Ones, Gisli included, had grown complacent and even arrogant and vain thinking that they had ridden the world of men and women from the fabric of evil.

The moment the warm hand of the down gatherer touched the clay sarcophagus, Gisli awoke from his long sleep and he realized his dreams of a secure homeland were false and misleading. The ever vigilant, but rarely combatant Hidden Folk, called him to action. He was responsible, thereby he was charged to put right the situation.

He, himself, had sealed the baked earthen box and witnessed in silence as volunteer Hidden Folk transported it and hid it deep inside the basalt of Grimsey. They had sacrificed their lives to the sea after that last great act to protect the secret. Only Gisli remained—and he went into deep hibernation.

Four hundred years passed. Time, tide, wind, and rain had eroded just enough of the crypt to make it the perfect place for eider ducks to nest and leave behind their soft, highly sought-after down.

The man who found the box didn't know what it was—but knew enough to phone the Museum of Sorcery and Witchcraft in Hólmavík, a small fishing village in the western fjords. It was no coincidence that said museum had been founded so far off the beaten track. It had been built upon the epicenter of witchcraft in Iceland; in the lands sacred to the Hidden Folk.

In the lands coveted by developers.

The curator was a man of great cunning and abilities—some of which ran toward being quite unethical and unholy. Gisli had followed the man's career in vivid nightmares, and feared him.

The box was hoisted from the cliffs and laid out on the grassy expanse overlooking the bluffs. A tent was erected. Outlined in black against the off-white heavy canvas of the tent, Gisli watched the curator's shadow quiver as the lid was lifted from the box. It was a devil's dance. The curator writhed like a serpent ready to mate entranced by the scent of a female.

Gisli's stomach heaved and he vomited. The curator made his guts churn with rage. The man's sadistic penchant for items of macabre significance preceded him. He would know exactly what had been unearthed. He could read the runes, recognize the spells. He was a man who would break sacred seals without stopping to consider his actions. The curator had once excavated the grave of a Catholic priest at the site of Iceland's first church. Make that *graves*, plural, of a Catholic priest, *singular*. When Protestantism swept Iceland, that last medieval Catholic priest was beheaded. Adding insult to grievous injury, his head and body were buried separately, in unmarked sites outside the churchyard.

The curator hadn't considered the consequences then, either. He made a spectacle of his find and subsequent reburial of the priest in a new crypt. His fascination with dead things frightened some, and intrigued others. Most were simply embarrassed that a learned man would seek out sensationalism and greedily disturb the spirits of the land for publicity or profit.

Gisli choked as a photographer's flash popped. The canvas tent brightened with each snap, like caged lightning. Each flash heightened Gisli's rage, fear, anxiety.

The curator had opened an Old Icelandic Pandora's Box. Only Hope would not remain no matter how quickly the box was closed. Hope lay in one place only. In the utter destruction of the treasure.

A collective gasp rang through the tent, echoing to the perch where Gisli sat with his gyrfalcon brethren. A shifter, he could hide in plain sight as a gull, a tern, a puffin, or as the mighty raptor, gyrfalcon. An ancient being of vampiric origin, he didn't need to see with his eyes to discern the activity inside the tent. He could smell the foul odor of death and taste it on the air. *Nábrók*, the heinous dead man's trousers, wrought in human flesh and emblazon with staves of great power, had been found.

And now comes a witch to claim them, Gisli thought. And now comes the battle for Iceland.

Chapter One

The condom broke.

Her granny down in *N'Awleans* had always told her to look in little things for signs and wonders of God's plan for her. Saber took the fall of the Trojan empire as a definite sign she should get out of town.

Everything in her life had been pointing that direction for some time, anyway. The death of the mighty Trojan warrior during the heat of battle was the last straw.

She'd had her fill of strong coffee and hot men. Good-bye, Seattle.

The process of relocating halfway around the world had given her time to clear her head and purge her soul of vigorous men with members larger than *Trojan-Enz* could handle. That's what she got for taking home a guy from the *Dog and Pony Show*, a rather risqué singles club on First Avenue. She'd taken home a man built like a horse, twice as smelly, and just as full of manure. Never go grocery shopping when you're hungry and never go to a sex club when you're horny.

Saber had lived abroad for two weeks, and hadn't had a roll in the hay for six months. Sister Saber Evangelista. Saber the celibate. Saber the born-again virgin. Celibacy was not for her.

She'd stopped sleeping. Awake, her mind racing, she more than once caught herself fantasizing about getting some. It wasn't the orgasms she missed. Those she could get on her own, thank you very much. It was the setting of the bait, the luring in, hooking the prospect and the reeling in of the lover-of-the-moment. Sometimes he'd flop around her deck and sometimes he'd be a trophy catch. Her fishing hole had been well stocked, but had become much too predictable. Enter the *Dog and Pony Show*.

Saber didn't feel she was promiscuous—just active. She didn't bed every man she met, after all. Thereby, she'd made it six months sans a tumble without having to resort to chewing on car tires to calm her nerves.

The itch had returned one bright evening as she lay awake staring out the window into a landscape of stark and barren beauty—and she figured it was time to find someone to scratch it for her. Her new home had some prime pickings, too. No need to rush things and bed the first reasonably agreeable suspect. The tease of going without was almost as stimulating as the act itself. She'd wait until just the right man came along. And if he turned out to be the boy next door, well ... *yummy*.

She had a lucrative consulting contract, the envy of her peers and associates, and more money being socked away into her 401K than she could ever spend in one lifetime.

Saber Evangelista was the backbone of AlumaTrends, mistress of their IT Department and developer of the very software the company had just banked on to make it appear their projects in virgin lands were environmentally friendly. *Appear* being the key word.

Saber had developed Ice-Eye to map more deeply and more thoroughly than any other GPS device, and any given government, ever had. Ice-Eye promised to locate and map the areas of least impact in delicate regions such as Iceland where one false step of the drill could open up a geyser in the middle of a multi-billion dollar project. In truth, and it was a truth she conveniently ignored, Ice-Eye's deep viewing capabilities could be

used to find precious metals such as *gold in them thar hills* and map out, to the smallest detail, exactly how much land could be chewed up, swallowed, and spit back out during the mining process before international treaties and moral codes of conduct were broken. Turning a blind eye to the raping of Iceland wasn't too hard with as much money as they were throwing at her. Of course, maybe that's why she hadn't been sleeping, too.

She held the pass-code to activate the system. She held the *only* pass-code.

She'd made the system impenetrable, hacker proof. No wonder she'd been courted by government agents from three countries. Governments didn't pay enough. Private industry was where the big bucks were. There'd be a meeting soon—a meeting when she would sign over the pass-code and her association with the company would end. First, she had to train the hard-hats and novice AlumaTrends techs to use the system she'd written. Then she'd sip champagne with the suits, get her picture taken at a ribbon cutting, and drop out of the picture. Twenty-six years old and retired. Make that twenty-six, retired, voluptuous, active, and smart.

She'd developed a modern day *Enola Gay*. It wasn't the bomb, itself, but the mechanism to deploy the thing. It was making a handful of AlumaTrends execs very wealthy.

Saber was both the beauty and a geek. A dangerous combination. She told folks she wouldn't date outside her IQ range, no matter how much those execs with their mid-one hundred seventy IQ's begged. She was a gorgeous, intelligent woman of color in a world of pasty white men who rarely saw natural sunlight. And she knew that she was their queen.

* * * *

The hairs standing up on the back of his neck told Gisli the *Nábrók* had not yet left Akureyri. The sweet summer air carried a foul undertone—a scent no human could detect. It clung to the air like a heavy, invisible mist. An air-freshener gone rancid. It was the foul magic of the necropants working its insidiousness on a greedy witchling.

He'd been awake for nearly a week, reeling with the knowledge that the necropants had been both rediscovered, then stolen. It took some time for him to track them after they'd been scurried off Grimsey by rats in mens' clothing. He blessed the names of all that was holy that the soulless, devil-beget item had not yet left Iceland. He had risen from his ancient slumber like a phoenix and now grew more powerful with each passing day as the sun remained high in the sky longer and darkness never came. He was a vampire, true—and a shifter. But he thrived on sunlight and feared the creatures of the night. He was of the vampires who embraced the light and flew in the bright skies of the midnight sun as hawks and falcons. Iceland had been home to his kind for ten centuries.

Like all vampires, he needed blood. Warm blood. Living blood.

His search for the stolen necropants had kept him too busy to feed. He was starving. He needed to find a suitable donor. He needed to create a helper-being from mortal clay by taking his or her blood and imparting unto that person new thought processes, a human liaison to act on behalf of his hidden realm. A Renfrew to his Count. But without the bugs.

He'd circled the village on his bike, feeling his way around the townsfolk, hoping one of them would fit the bill. It was easier to prey on sheep. Sheep had no hidden agendas to be mastered, opinions or blood tainted by power and greed. Too bad he

needed to utilize the services of someone farther up the food chain. If he gave into the hunger, he would lose the ability to enlist an ally of the human persuasion. One chance only—so his choice had to be wisely made.

It was her scent that alerted him. Her enticing, contradictory aroma of powerful innocence and blind intelligence wafted about his head on an icy north wind like an errant feather. It tickled. She had a tantalizing bouquet of wantonness and virtue combined with a touch of darkness. Like an exotic perfume, it announced her arrival long before she appeared. She was jasmine in the air, gingered-chocolate on the tip of his tongue. She'd been in indirect contact with the necropants, too. Their scent pervaded her aura. Through her blood, he could track them. And destroy them once and for all.

He set off on his bicycle, hoping to catch her eye without divulging too much of himself in the process. He needed her to develop enough interest in him to come meet him on his turf. Curiosity may kill the cat, but it creates allies, too.

Though far from human, he had a man's needs—and watching the uniquely dark beauty wandering the streets of Akureyri made him acutely aware of those needs. When had he last taken a woman? He couldn't remember.

Maybe that was about to change.

* * * *

As horny as she was, it was no wonder she reacted to the blonde god's reflection in the shop window as if she was a teenager worshipping a rock idol. Took on a whole new meaning to window-shopping.

Saber's cheeks flushed. Her heart began to pound; her temperature rose. That naughty place between her legs tightened and throbbed.

Their eyes met in the reflection as he sailed by on his bicycle. He shot her a sly smile and nodded his head. Saber had to avert her gaze. He was magnificent. Perfect. If the beauty of a moon reflecting on a pond took human form, it would be he. How could any human on the face of the earth be worthy of looking into this man's eyes? He was *divine*, in every sense of the word. Clad in a light blue sweatshirt emblazoned with the words GRIMSEY TRUST on the back, he sailed down the slope into the ferry lane. He then stopped and looked back at her before drifting out of site onto the loading dock.

She had hoped he would stop for her. She was getting used to men stopping dead in their tracks when passing her. That had pretty much been the case since moving to Iceland. Being a woman of color in as shallow a gene pool as northern Iceland's, was proving to be a worthwhile change of venue. An exotic mix of Korean and African-American descent, Saber had been living and working in a society that could trace its genetic make up back to eleven hundred fair haired and complexioned settlers.

Two weeks on the rock and she'd marked seven notches in her lipstick case. Seven times she'd smiled politely when approached, fumbled through short conversations of combined Iceland and English, but hadn't taken a gent up on an offer of drinks yet. Truthfully, that boy next door was still looking pretty damned good that way. Still, she was biding her time. However, if this guy stopped ... she'd make an exception.

She frowned in his wake. *I just saw an angel. I swear to God, that man is a freakin' angel. Angels aren't supposed to make you feel this way!* The gruel scene in the musical *Oliver!* came to mind. *Please, sir—I want some more.*

Saber sighed, having lost interest in the antique books in the shop window. She

wanted to flip through the blonde's pages. He'd disappeared on the five o'clock ferry. Good thing, too. Or she might have tried to catch up with him, tackle his bike, and do the nasty with him on the gutter side of Laxagotta.

Dismayed and a bit chilly in the ever-present northerly breeze, she set out for home, which was painfully all uphill. Up a remorseful, steep, hill. Only intrepid Icelanders would have planned that Akureyri, Iceland's garden city, be situated on a hill. A thousand year ago the settlers to the area didn't care about the problem of wearing heels while shopping. They'd probably been thinking about the fabulous natural harbor and defensible location. Silly Vikings.

Red-roofed blue and purple trimmed stucco houses dotted her path, tucked neatly inside little fenced-in yards where dwarf evergreen trees stretched to catch the long rays of daylight. Little fences where behind good citizens lived peacefully; the most exciting event in their lives was watching the flowers grow in the midnight sun.

The walk was long and excruciating, made interesting only by thoughts of the blonde god on the bicycle.

The elderly couple she'd taken a room with were very quiet with limited English skills. Saber was fairly certain all the English they knew came from watching "The Simpsons" during the dark season—as the government shut down television during daylight months. No Homer during June, July, or August. A true travesty.

Saber communicated with her landlords via her rudimentary Icelandic vocabulary, the teenaged neighbor with his blue ribbons in speaking English, German, and Danish, and her Palm with its Icelandic/English/English/Icelandic dictionary.

The octogenarian couple at Freyjugata five had rented her a room with a private bath. She had never seen two people use more table sugar or drink as much coffee.

Each meal was accompanied by *skyr*, a thick yogurt hand-mixed by the wife and blended with heavy cream, and of course, sugar. Definitely an acquired taste, though it was easily recognizable and by far the least foul-smelling item in the fridge.

The couple never slept—which worked for Saber, as neither did she. No Icelanders slept too long during the summer. Twenty-four hour daylight saw every Icelander up all night, drinking coffee. How anyone worked productively during the summer months was beyond her. The banks in Akureyri closed at one o'clock every day for their employees to take a "sun coffee" break for thirty minutes. It was not unusual to see bank tellers in their skivvies sitting along the sidewalk outside their place of employment, a soft-drink in one hand, cigarette in the other, basking in the sunshine like proud cats.

Saber looked forward to St. John the Baptist Day, when it was perfectly legal to roll naked in the morning dew. Authorities around the country turned their heads on public nudity that morning as long as no one was touching someone else's nakedness in the grass.

She made a mental note to find and get to know the blonde with the bike before St. John's Day. There'd be a morning worth waking up for!

Two or three months of the midnight sun followed by nine months of darkness was their lot, those genetically pure Icelanders. Saber had long loved their history, myths and legends. Her family didn't get it. Her mother, the Korean daughter of an ambassador to the United States had married a Black military officer with political aspirations. They had tried to interest her in ethnic studies and politics. They'd become resigned to the fact that their bi-racial daughter had interests as dissimilar to her background and upbringing as

was humanly possible. They shook their heads as they walked by her room when she still lived at home. Pictures of Viking gods and books on Leif Eiríksson just didn't match their dream for their daughter. Sure, they were a combined-race family with ties all around the globe, but Saber had fixated on the one thing they weren't. *Nordic*.

When an opportunity arose to travel to Iceland for her company, Saber jumped at the chance. Of course, it could have simply been an emotional reaction to the bursting of the dam after riding the wild pony. Iceland offered her a chance for a fresh start and a shit-load of money. God knows she didn't want to show her face around downtown Seattle anytime soon. She'd taken home a *pony boy*. Everyone would be asking her if she'd walked bull-legged for a week after the event. She needn't be reminded of her poor choices.

For her, Iceland was the opportunity of a lifetime.

Beautiful place.

Beautiful people.

Yummy men.

A second chance.

The job provided housing and a one-year work visa. It was her idea to board with the elderly couple. Exposure to the culture and all. She couldn't very well do that living alone in a small flat.

Kristjana, her house mother, the Frá—pronounced 'frow' as in *eyebrow*, was enjoying a bit of sun coffee on her back porch when Saber trudged up the hill to the little red house with its four-foot high evergreen trees planted by the front stoop. Kristjana had been a very famous actress in the Icelandic theater during her youth. At eighty-five, she didn't look or act, old. Must have been all the caffeine and sugar.

"Jaeja," the old woman sighed under her breath as Saber collapsed onto the porch.

"Jaeja," Saber replied. It wasn't a word of greeting. It was more of an Icelandic *øy vey*, pronounced *yie (as in tie)-ya*. Saber sat up and glanced over the fence and as politely as she could tried to tell Kristjana that she was heading over to the neighbor's. "Eg vil fara til Steinríkur's heim." She knew the words were right—it was the order she said them in and the conjugation of the verbs that was way, way wrong. The old woman just smiled and nodded.

Saber replied with the word for thanks, as she headed "over the hill" to the neighbors'. Another Icelandic colloquialism—the neighbor's house was not next door, but over the hill—even on level ground.

Kristjana muttered something she didn't understand. Icelanders often spoke with a very breathy accent, making those not accustomed to the language think the entire nation was asthmatic. Not so, of course. The quiet manner of speaking was just their way. Until they were drunk. Then things could get loud.

Saber passed through the garden gate between her home and the neighbor's. "Rík?" she called.

The large, youthful redhead opened his bedroom window. "Hallo, Saber. Need to find out what that funky purple sauce in the Frá's ice-box is?"

Saber laughed. "How did you know?"

"I could smell it. Kristjana made pickled cabbage today. I'll tell you this—when you see something bright purple in an old Icelandic's cooler, don't eat it," Rík warned.

"Can I come in?" Saber asked.

“Of course. The front door is open,” Rik replied.

He was a good kid. Eighteen, intelligent as all Hell and she was pretty sure, had a hard-on for her. Thing was, she was terribly attracted to him, too. Firm young Icelandic flesh at its best.

His parents weren't home.

Dare she enter the bedroom of a European boy? Sixteen was the age of emancipation in Iceland. This boy was out of school, two years into junior college and just about to transfer to the university. Fair game. A little romp with the boy wouldn't be illegal—though she was an older woman. But then she might end up with having him hanging on her when she wanted to spend a bit of her free time digging for angels.

“How are you Ricky?” she asked. They exchanged a bear hug, lingering for a moment in each other's arms before nervously pulling away. There was nothing remotely right about the way Saber felt when in his arms, however briefly. She was pretty sure Rik felt the same titillation as she did. He always gave her a little extra squeeze. She could feel his tension—it was smack dab front and center. It just wasn't right—this physical attraction. It was wrong. So very wrong. And naughty bad. Bad in the best way possible.

Rik beamed, obviously enjoying his Americanized nickname. “I am fine. I am studying to write a paper for the Center.”

Still in his arms, Saber looked up into the boy's eyes. Bright, bright, clear blue eyes framed by gorgeous unblemished skin and deep red hair. Her little Viking. He had some height and weight on her. She wasn't small—at five foot eight and one hundred fifty pounds, she was voluptuous and enjoyed her fuller figure. Rik was easily six five and maybe two hundred fifty pounds. All of it worth the effort to unwrap.

She leaned back, allowing his embrace to cradle her. Her arms were suspended around his neck. He dropped her onto his bed.

Saber laughed and sat upright. Crotch level. *Damn*. “What's your topic?” Saber asked hoping to deflect some of the pounding sexual tension between them. It was going to happen. It was—and they both knew it. It was just a matter of when. Every time they visited, it got harder and harder not to make one move farther up the sexual intimacy scale.

“I am writing of Akureyri's ghosts,” Steinrikur replied.

“Ghosts?” Saber laughed. She reclined onto her elbow on his bed box. The hand-carved nature of his bed told her it had been in his family for generations. The thin, firm mattress puffed out a loose eiderdown feather as she settled onto the bed.

“There are many in our history. I write about the necropants found on Grimsey quite recently,” Rik replied.

That caught her attention. “Necropants? *Dead pants?*”

“Yes.” He popped a mint into his mouth and offered her the pack. “It is only the second *Nábrók* to have been found intact. A very rare and exciting find. However, after they were removed from Grimsey,” Rik paused. “You do know about Grimsey, yes? The little island above Iceland that is over the Arctic Circle?”

Saber took a mint. She sounded out the new Icelandic word. “*Now-broke*. Is that right? I do know about Grimsey, too.”

Rik smiled. He certainly was a handsome young devil. Maybe she should do the boy and see how things go. Put a smile on both their faces. She cast her eyes over the fly of his jeans. Looks like the boy has a healthy package—but the thought of riding another

pony gave her chills. Too big was too much. She wanted *just right* like Goldilocks.

Rik continued, “*Wery* good, Saber. Your Icelandic improves each day. Any way, after they were put in the museum, they were stolen. It was not unexpected, however. *Nábrók* were once highly sought after. Witches in Iceland used to dig up the body of a man to flay the skin from the lower half to make breeches in order to become *draugur*. A special symbol was sewn onto the,” he touched his hand to his crotch, “The *hrtspungur*.”

“The balls?” Saber replied, knowing that *hrtspungur* was a particularly nasty dish made of pressed pickled ram’s testicles.

“Yes, the balls. The symbol would bring coin into the purse, and give the wearer very special powers.”

“Such as?” Saber asked.

“Strength. The ability to walk in the clouds. And a very long life. But ... the wearer had to consume blood to keep the magic strong. The necropants need fresh blood. The Old Ones hid the necropants to stop the *draugur* from becoming too powerful. There was a war.”

“Who are the Old Ones?” Saber asked.

“The vampires, of course,” Rik replied.

Saber smiled. He pronounced it *wampyr*. Very cute. “There was a war over who could drink blood? God, Rik. In Iceland that can be accomplished by eating dark rye!”

“They could not eat their blood in their bread as we do when we have *blothmir*. It had to be fresh. Sheep or human, mostly.”

“Wearing the necropants made the witches vampires? The witches became vampires?”

“Not vampires. They are separate beings. The witches who wear necropants and feast upon blood are called *draugur*. We use the same word for ghost in Icelandic. To an outsider, it could be confusing. The witches and the *draugur* are not the vampires here. The others—the Old Ones—are the vampires. I must add, too, that it is the necropants, when worn by a witch, that require the blood. To stay warm and like natural skin. They are spell-crafted and have a life force of their own. If the witch does not drink blood, the necropants will dry up and wither away, and turn the witch’s body to ash.”

Saber swallowed hard. “Lovely.”

“We do not dismiss the fanciful so quickly here. As I said, the necropants have been stolen. And many sheep have been found dead without their blood recently. It is believed that a witch has stolen the necropants to become a *draugur*. He or she is now feeding in order to gain strength, wealth, and power over the elements. If a *draugur* walks again, then too shall an Old One—in order to recapture the pants and destroy them forever. The witches must protect the magic of the pants in order for progress to take root here. In truth, I do not believe their motives are evil. When last the *draugur* worked the spells, Iceland became a Protestant country. The mindset of our Protestant leaders brought sweeping changes to the country over a two hundred year period. It changed things here for the better. The Old Ones are self-appointed guardians of the land—but they do not relish changes to their home. They will protest, and there will be a great battle between the creatures.”

“Are you telling me that there’s going to be local news coverage of a war between the witches and vampires?”

“It has been recorded in our history that such things took place. *Draugur* appear

when great changes need to occur. They are the harbingers of change to the land. The vampires are angels bound to Iceland by magical fetters and prefer to leave things as they have always been.”

Angels? I saw one, I think. Saber interjected, “Magical fetters? Like the rope made from the sound of a cat’s footfall and spittle of a bird that tied up Fenris the wolf in Norse Mythology?”

Rik nodded. “Yes, exactly. The *wampyr* feed only to live and do not kill, though through the taking of blood from a human they become like a shadow to that person’s soul. The host shares a body and spirit with the *wampyr*. They can make the person act on their behalf. There are stories of Old Ones, or their followers, leaving sheep, sod, or driftwood at the doors of starving families. There are stories of women receiving deep sexual pleasure at odd times—such as during Mass, because she is possessed by an Old One and he has chosen that time to make love to her—from the inside out! The vampires are regarded as good beings—beings of light—though I have my doubts. Some truth about them was long hidden. My father excavated a rune stone—the Husavik bowl...”

Saber nodded. “Yes, I read about that. That’s your father? I didn’t realize that. Quite a find.”

“When translated, the runes told the true story of the Old Ones and their war with the witches. Someday, this new information will enlighten Iceland. With my father’s assistance, I am researching all known historical aspects of the witches and the *draugur* quite intensely. With a copy of the fully translated Husavik bowl, I shall prove who truly is the source of evil in Iceland. It will be a prize-winning essay.”

“From what I’ve heard, the evil of Iceland is the aluminum plant and the developers building it. My employers. Me.”

Rik nodded and replied in Icelandic, “Fortunately for you, perhaps, I am one of the proponents for the project. Iceland needs jobs for its young people other than fishing and banking. After University, I shall be a journalist and shall report on the great doings of Saber Evangelista and AlumaTrends. Of course, many are very concerned with the impact of the plant. The location is sacred, and has long been said to be home to many *Huldufolk*. They say the Old Ones will not allow the rivers to be dammed and land flooded to generate power for the smelter. The *wampyr* owe a life-debt to the *Hidden Folk* for sacrificing their own to hide the necropants. Moreover, the *Huldufolk* are sworn enemies of the *draugur*.”

“I am amazed that Iceland’s mysticism blends so readily with its modernization. But I wonder, Ricky ... why not tap the tides or divert more geo-thermal activity to power the plant as opposed to damming a river and flooding acres and acres of land? This is Iceland! Geysers open up in farmer’s potato fields here. Energy is not an issue. I’ve asked the same question to the head honchos of the company and they look at me like I’m an idiot. Just teach the hard-hats how to use the computer system, Miss Evangelista, or we’ll slap your ass behind a desk where glorified geeks like you are should be.”

“I have no answer, either—though slapping your ass does sound lovely.” Steinrikur winked. “The people are divided upon this issue. Some want great modernization and offer their family lands to the power companies. Others fight like true warriors to protect their property and keep foreign developers away.”

“Spoken like a true warrior, yourself, Ricky. Now, about slapping my ass...”

“You know, Saber—I like you *wery* much,” Rik replied.

Saber smiled. She loved his “v” words. *I like you wary much, too. Now take off your jeans.* She bit her lip. “I like you, too.”

As though the gauntlet had been thrown; the glove slapped across the cheek—the call to duel had been made. At the *Dog and Pony Show*, such words could easily be translated to mean, *I want to wear your butt as a hat.*

And then there was silence.

A rather pregnant aura of need, want and desperately hot teenaged passion filled the void between them. Saber had been there a time or two before—but never with a younger man—even when she’d been his age. She let her eyes fall to his fly again. She then cast her eyes upwards. He was smiling at her. A subtle smile. A smirk.

She needed to break the tension between them before she followed her gut, reached out and...

Saber straightened her back, sitting more erect and less in a “come hither recline.” “My, it’s getting hot in here.” She paused, again finding herself apprehensive about a little May/December sexual tension. Delightful, sweet tension. “It could be how utterly distracting I find you, but I’m not sure I understand what you’re telling me here,” she paused, almost wishing she hadn’t said that. She caught Rik’s smoldering eyes fixed on her bosom. *Yeah, I distract him, too.* “All righty then, Ricky, before we continue heading the way I think we’re heading...”

Steinrikur pulled off his over-sweater. Saber swallowed hard at the outline of his young, muscular chest through the plain white t-shirt underneath.

She continued, slowly unbuttoning her own sweater. “Make that the way I *know* we’re heading. Necropants found recently on Grimsey have been stolen. It is feared that witches who wish to gain certain magical abilities have stolen the gruesome drawers, which get hungry of their own accord.” She ran her hands across the soft cashmere of her sweater, over her breasts. A big tease. And she knew it. “Sheep have been killed and drained of blood—and with no true predators in Iceland, the deed is being blamed on witches donning the necropants in an attempt to harness the magic and become all powerful, to stop the Iceland’s indigenous pixies and trolls from halting the construction of the power plant and smelter in the western fjords. Assisting the pixies is at least one fallen vampiric being, who does not feed indiscriminately, but who acts like an agent for the Salvation Army in times of famine, and may be of divine origin.”

Her sweater hung open, revealing that which God and Grannie gave her. An ample bosom encased in a Wonderbra.

“It sounds better when explained in Icelandic. It would start something like this: *Tunglid vedur i skyjum*—the moon wades through the clouds. And I have not even told you the entire legend yet,” Steinrikur replied. He knelt before Saber and pushed aside her soft lavender cashmere sweater. He pulled it over her shoulders. “We still believe in hauntings here. It is not uncommon for people to seek advice from a witch before breaking ground for a new house, lest the Hidden Folk are disturbed. Trolls and fairies live here, Saber. Why not vampires?”

Saber took a deep breath. The anticipation was killing her. *Take me now. You are the brightest, most intelligent, most articulate eighteen-year-old boy I’ve ever met and I want to rock your world.* “Fascinating.”

With more experience and finesse than his age dictated he should have, Rik smoothly slipped Saber’s bra straps down. “I am sure you are not here to discuss my

article. Do you need an interpreter next door, my love?”

Saber smiled. It was common to refer to a friend as a loved one. It didn't mean he wanted to bag her. Actually, he probably did. Actually, she figured they were about to shag quite fiercely. And quite frankly, the thought of running her breasts across that thick red mane of his ... whoo! “I came to ask the best way to get to Grimsey. But now, I think maybe I need to ask you something else.”

Rik lowered his lips to Saber's. “And what would that be?”

“When are you going to go *iviking* on me?” she asked, referring to the Norse Age custom of young men leaving home to seek adventure, fame, and fortune.

Rik pressed his lips to Saber's. He climbed atop her, pinning her to his bed. She shifted her weight a little and returned his kiss, running her hands through his thick red hair.

Like teenagers rolling in the back seat of daddy's car, they mashed on the bed, hips gyrating and hands exploring. When they got naked, Saber didn't know. All she knew was that she was hot for this kid. Smoking hot.

She reached between them to get a grip on his erection. She had a pretty good idea of its girth by the weight of it on her leg. She liked what she felt. As soon as her fingertips touched the head, she wanted to taste it. Taste eighteen-year-old boy flesh.

Saber laughed and rolled Rik off her. As he ran his hands over her, she spun around on the bed and took the tip of his penis into her mouth. He was already hard, engorged. She stroked her hand upward on his shaft and pumped the head against her tongue.

She wiggled and writhed as he explored her vagina and clitoris with his soft fingers. She suppressed a cry of *Alleluia!* when he lifted her onto his face.

Doing a sixty-nine egged Saber on. No woman ever forgets how to give good head—it's like riding a bicycle. She got her rhythm down, pushing up with her hand and going down with her mouth, swallowing as much of him as she could. He was no horse—but in Iceland, ponies were the norm. This guy had nothing to be ashamed of.

His moans told her that he liked her mouth on him, and she sure as hell liked what he was doing to her. She thought she might drown him with how wet he was making her. Those little flicks of his tongue upward onto her clit, man ... the boy had talent. Saber had to give his dick a rest and relax her head against his groin as she felt the surge of orgasm building between her legs. This was the moment she had long anticipated. The call for safe sex. The momentary eye of the hurricane before passing into the storm. “Rik,” she whispered. “We should use protection.”

“Just fuck me, Saber. I'm a *wirgin*,” Rik replied before burying his tongue in her anus.

“And I know I'm clean.” She could barely get the words out. Her eyes rolled back in her head as wave of pleasure swept through her from stem to stern. Anilingus. Forbidden; naughty; nasty. *Damn, he's good.*

She pulled forward and in one swift move, impaled herself on Rik's hardness, going for a reverse cowgirl position. He brought his knees up. She reclined forward and used them to balance herself as she slid herself up and down against his shaft.

This was what she had been missing. Six months of celibacy came to an abrupt and sweet conclusion as she came. She bucked against Rik so hard the bed creaked and threatened to collapse. He pushed up into her in orgasm moments later.

Still entwined, Saber rested her head against his knees. He stroked her lower back.

After-glow set in. She squirmed a little, enjoying the sensation of his still-hard penis inside her.

“Saber,” Rik whispered.

“Yes?”

“I want you again.”

Saber sighed. “I can tell.”

“Let’s go out to the Jacuzzi. My parents won’t be home for hours,” Rik said.

“What if I scream when I come?” Saber asked.

“This is Iceland. Women screaming in orgasm is a common occurrence here.”

Saber pulled herself away from Rik. It was painful, this knowingly brief but still too long a separation of penis and vagina. Her clitoris throbbed, calling to her, *gimme more of that!* Such is sex with a teenaged boy. *Happy, lucky me.* “Before I lose consciousness or the ability speak—before I’m completely fucked-out, I’m wondering, Rik, shall I fly or take the ferry to Grimsey? I want to take my bike.”

Rik laughed. “You should take the ferry, of course.”

“Know the schedule?” Saber replied.

Rik replied as they walked nude through Rik’s house and into the back yard. “The ferry leaves Akureyri at eight o’clock in the morning and returns to Akureyri around noon, then departs for the island again at five. On Grimsey, if you cross the Arctic Circle on foot, the priest will issue you a diploma and pierce your ear.”

Saber mouthed the words *pierce your ear*, and considered the actions of such a priest, but held her tongue.

Iceland’s most abundant natural resource, hot water, awaited them in a lovely blue glass block Jacuzzi. She melted into Rik’s arms as she followed him into the hotpot.

“Would you like me to accompany you? To Grimsey?” he asked.

“I’ll have a little adventure. I’ll be all right.”

“Enjoy Grimsey. But Saber, do use caution. The spirits of Iceland thrive in isolation. Grimsey is as far north as you can get without having to paddle on an ice-flow. And take a lunch with you. I have not heard good things about the pub there. With only a hundred people living on the island, the services are very limited.”

Saber nodded. “Flatbread, smoked lamb and a thermos of coffee. How does that sound?”

Rik smirked. “I would prefer Dairy Queen.”

Saber wrinkled her nose. *I guess teenaged boys, hot or not, have garbage guts.*

“Even using Icelandic beef and sans the additives abundant in American fast food, I have no plans of ever walking into any restaurant where they ask me: can I help the next one down here, please?”

Rik laughed. He cupped Saber’s breasts as they floated in the bubbles. “Then I shall take you to *Perlan*.”

“Darling, I don’t think even Bill Gates could afford dinner at the *Pearl*,” Saber replied. “It’s only the most exclusive and expensive restaurant in Iceland. Maybe even northern Europe! And it’s on the other side of the island.”

“I won a prize for writing a very good paper on the mail-order brides from Thailand and the Philippines comprising five percent of Iceland’s work force. They are taking over our public market. I won dinner for two at the Pearl. The daily news ran the story. Would you like to see a copy?” Rik’s voice grew low and soft. “I have been coming into some

money, lately. Such as young Icelandic men don't usually see."

"That's quite the generous prize. *The Morgunblathid* forked the bill?"

Rik wrinkled his lovely brow. "Forked?"

"American slang. The newspaper sponsored the prize?"

"Yes."

"So when's dinner?" Saber asked. She stroked his penis with her right hand and lifted herself in the water so that she was facing him. With one thrust, he'd be in her. *Come to mama, baby boy.*

"I am working tomorrow night with my father, but the day after—how would that be? I shall make an appointment for us." Rik carried Saber to the opposite edge of the Jacuzzi and slid into her.

"At the Pearl. In Reykjavik?" Saber asked.

"Of course," Rik replied, giving her one good thrust. For an untried boy, he sure knew how to screw. His movements were deep and slow and with each pass, teased her clitoris from its sheathe. Saber wrapped her legs around his hips and held on for dear life as his thrusts grew more vigorous. He pressed her against the stone wall of the Jacuzzi so hard she knew she'd be bruised in the morning, but there was no stopping the juggernaut of lust moving him. She forgot about her back a moment later as she achieved a second stellar orgasm.

Water whipped out of the tub as they thrashed in climax, not suppressing one little gasp, moan or cry. Rik gritted his teeth and arched his back as his orgasm poured into her. He was milking it for every last iota of pleasure. She liked a man who saw things to full conclusion!

Exhausted, they moved to opposite sides of the Jacuzzi and played footsie while allowing the steam and jets to soothe their savage passions.

Rik smiled slyly and said softly in typical Icelandic manner, "Don't forget about me when you catch up with that which you are seeking to find on Grimsey. I know you are seeking something, and perhaps it is just that diploma for crossing the Arctic Circle on foot—but if you don't find what it is on Grimsey, then perhaps it is here."

A very astute comment from a very young man. She might forget about him if she took up with the blonde god. She enjoyed monogamy—even serial monogamy. She wasn't good at juggling relationships. If it's Tuesday it must be Brendan or Saturday with Mark. One lover at a time, thank you very much.

Would she pursue firm young flesh or angelic beauty?

The answer rested across the Arctic Circle on a little island with a hundred inhabitants. And she knew it.

* * * *

As the ferry pulled away from mainland Iceland, leaving relative civilization behind, Saber realized that she could sum up Iceland in one word. Windy. Never had she traveled to a place where the wind never ceased to blow. The biting chill burned her cheeks as she stood at the bow of the ferry, her borrowed bicycle secured to a steel bollard aboard the deck.

She reached up and twisted her curly black hair into a knot to keep it from whipping her head and giving her whiplash as the force of the boat moving against the wind wreaked havoc on her carefully primed 'do. Her crazy ass African hair with its thick,

glossy Asian characteristics was her best feature. That and the startling green eyes. Where those came from, no one knew; some bizarre genetic trait going back a couple of generations.

She'd skipped eyeliner and mascara before boarding. Good thing—her eyes were getting a good workout from the wind. She'd packed some cosmetic essentials in her backpack, along with lunch, water, and condoms. One should always be prepared, after all.

Her ears were filled with her iPod Shuffle's ear buds. Shakira's "Eyes Like Yours" made her want to dance across the deck. Common sense told her to hang on as the ferry left the harbor and headed out across the Arctic Sea to Grimsey. No dancing aboard a small vessel sailing across wind-tossed waters. Her hips would have to remain stationary this trip.

Grimsey rose up from the Arctic like a green jewel floating atop a smoky glass mirror. Small jewel. Very, very small.

The entire settlement was situated around the tiny harbor and landing strip for the puddle jumper that flew to the island every three or four days. A single radio tower rose in the distance; probably for cell phones and to transmit data to fishing fleets in the high Arctic. Saber clutched an old tourist map of Grimsey to keep it from blowing out of her hands, and rolled her bike off the ferry. She found it tucked in the bookshelf in her room.

The ferry landed without incident. A handful of women and small children boarded as she rolled her bike off. Saber parked the bike alongside a pylon and checked the map against the actual layout of the town. Town may have been too big a word; a pub, with a guesthouse, a kindergarten, a post office, and a church. What else does an arctic island three miles long and two miles wide need? A dog sled rental?

Several tidy houses, resembling those in Akureyri, dotted the landscape. Gulls and terns cried, and a single dog barked.

Though it was scarcely eleven o'clock in the morning, Saber thought she'd get a drink at the pub. Probably coffee. Maybe a beer. Who knows? If the angel lived on Grimsey, he might be thirsty, too.

The tavern was amazingly well-equipped for an establishment catering to a hundred year-round residents, the odd pilot, and two or three hundred day-tripping tourists a year. A painted mural behind the bar showed a puffin and gyrfalcon sharing a nest while several ptarmigans looked on. The puffin was sitting on an egg.

"Komdu sæl," Saber said politely.

"How are you?" the barkeep replied in perfect English.

"Oh, you speak English. Wonderful. Could I have a cup of coffee, please?"

"Sugar?" the man asked.

Saber shook her head. "Cream. *Rjomi*," she replied, happy she'd remembered the word in Icelandic.

The barman pulled a dark brown cup from behind the counter and poured strong smelling black coffee for her. "What brings you to Grimsey? We've not had many tourists this season."

"Curiosity," Saber replied.

"There is nothing here save for many birds and of course, the circle."

"Will I get a certificate if I cross the circle on foot today?" Saber asked.

"Yes, and an extra prize if you go across it backwards. Today is the longest day of

the year and the circle radiates magic this day.”

“It is the solstice, isn't it? I'd forgotten. Well, if I follow your advice, what is the extra prize?”

“Walk across the circle backwards, and with your eyes closed. Once across, open your eyes, facing the direction you came from. Turn slowly to face the opposite way. As you turn, an apparition of your true love will appear before your eyes.”

“I'm not looking for true love,” Saber replied.

The barkeep laughed. “Then it shall be the vision of a good time for you. Okay?”

“Okay,” Saber replied. “I'm wondering about something.”

“Yes?”

“I saw a man on a bike wearing a t-shirt that said GRIMSEY TRUST on the back. What is the Grimsey Trust?” Saber asked.

“Something you will not find in guide books, that's for certain.”

Saber smiled. “Oh, yeah? Do tell.”

“The Trust was founded by emissaries to the mortal world on behalf of the *Hidden Folk*, I'd say, about three hundred years ago,” the man replied.

Saber held out her hand. “I'm Saber Evangelista.”

“Hakkon Magnusson,” the man replied, shaking Saber's hand.

“So, Hakkon, the Hidden Folk have humans doing their bidding?”

“Do you find that hard to believe?” Hakkon asked.

Saber took a sip of her coffee. “No. I find it intriguing.”

“Will you be staying the night? The room is available,” Hakkon offered.

“I hadn't planned on it,” Saber replied.

“I see you are holding an old ferry schedule. There are no more runs today. Maintenance,” Hakkon replied. “And your ferry has already departed for the mainland.”

Saber shrugged her shoulders. “I guess I'm staying the night. Do you take VISA?”

“Lunch is at two. Dinner at eight. And yes, I take VISA.” He passed Saber a key.

“Enjoy your night on Grimsey.”

Saber downed her coffee. The rich, bitter taste mixed with the sweet cream energized her. “How much do I owe you?”

“Comes with the room,” Hakkon replied. “And your meals and for you, a private washroom.”

“Well, so much to return to. Thanks. I'll be back. I'm going to explore,” Saber announced.

“That's good. The bar rush starts in about fifteen minutes when the fishermen come in for their second breakfast—you don't want to smell that way all day.”

“Thanks for the tip. Anything noteworthy I should see?” Saber asked.

“The manager for the Grimsey Trust is better qualified to give you a tour of our little island. Shall I ring him for you?”

“Sure,” Saber replied. “That would be nice.”

Hakkon picked up a handset from under the counter and punched in a number. The conversation was so quick she couldn't catch but two or three words. “His associate will meet you at the sign post.”

Saber laughed. “Sign post?”

Hakkon made a gesture of direction with his hands as he replied, “The signpost—like in M*A*S*H. It tells you how far to somewhere else. It is at the end of the road.”

"I'll see you at four," Saber replied. "Thanks, again."

Hakkon nodded. He mumbled something under his breath that she didn't quite catch. Something like, "maybe."

Maybe he'd see her at 4:00?

Saber hopped on her bike and rode east, the direction Hakkon had pointed her. The sole village on Grimsey was not too lively a place. Bright eyes surrounded by wrinkled skin peered out at her from behind a lace curtain. She got the odd smile from a child playing on a porch. There were no more than twenty or so houses scattered along the single roadway between the ferry landing and the airstrip.

She passed the mercantile and the physician's office and apothecary. By appointment or chance, said a little sign on the door, in English. A joke? There must have been a very slight incline, as she had to peddle faster the closer she came to the signpost. It had a dozen arms stretching out from a concrete-encased base in desperate need of paint. It did remind her of M*A*S*H.

She engaged the kick-stand on the bike and hopped off.

"You are on the line," a voice called to her in flawless English.

Saber turned to face the speaker. A very handsome older man with snow-white hair had ridden up silently behind her. "Are you looking for a tour?" he asked.

"Should I cross it walking backwards?" Saber asked. She paused for the man to laugh. He didn't. Apparently he didn't know the rules. She put on her business face. "Grimsey Trust?"

"I am only an employee of the Trust. Gisli is its heart. He asked me to give you directions to his home. He lives in a sod house, in the old style—not far from here."

"A sod house? That's interesting," Saber replied.

"You must go across the Arctic Circle to get there," the man replied.

Saber laughed. "I believe I'm standing on the Arctic Circle." She took one step north. "Now I'm across it."

"Ride north from your present location and you will come to Gisli's house. It is the only one of its kind on the island."

"Why couldn't he meet me here, himself?" Saber asked.

"He is watching the ice flow."

"He watches ice?"

"Lots of ice. You'll see. Enjoy your visit."

Saber smiled and took off on her bike, noting that a word scrawled on a fork of the signpost said 'civilization'—and it was pointing in the opposite direction.

The moment she left the manicured village on the southern tip, the island's true form became abundantly apparent. It was an open-air aviary. Birds were everywhere. Nesting on rocky outcroppings. Lining the cliffs. Swooping into the black waters for food. Flying in the air above her, doing a strafe and run over her head to sway her away from their eggs or chicks. Bird droppings littered the basalt and cries of gulls drowned out the gentle coos of other nesting seabirds. Not ten minutes north, and so near the edge of the island that she could see land's end, a little sod house with a green grass roof rose up from the red earth. A trail of smoke rose from the round stone chimney. The scent of roasting meat filled the air.

Saber dropped her bike and approached following a stone path cut straight down until her head was at roof level. A cheerful red door welcomed her. She knocked.

"I'm not at home."

The voice sounded mature, intelligent and deep. Saber turned. She nearly toppled over from surprise. It was her angel.

"Grimsey Trust?" she asked. "I'm Saber. Hakkon at the bar..."

"Gisli. I am the administrator for the Trust. Please, join me. I'm recording an ice flow."

"Why?" Saber asked.

"Why come with me, or why do I record rogue ice burgs? I'm teasing. Don't bother to reply. Just come with me. Do hurry." He paused. "We've met, no?"

Saber shook her head and climbed up the stairs, accepting Gisli's hand as she reached the top. She didn't want to look at him. He was too brilliant—like a halogen lantern. She had expected a surge of white-hot electricity to flow from his embrace. His hand was cold. "Your hand is like ice," she commented.

"I've been watching ice. Must be the resultant effect. Come. We can chat while I record my data," Gisli replied.

He didn't release her hand. Dashing off like middle schoolers about to smooch behind the track shed during class time, Gisli led Saber to a rather high-tech viewing post, set up to view straight out to sea.

Saber was already cold. The wind never stopped in Iceland, and Grimsey had zero defense from the chilly North Pole air shooting down from the top of the world. Gisli's touch chilled her to the bone.

"What are you searching for?" she asked.

"Look," Gisli offered.

Saber put her eye to his high-power telescope. She squinted and focused, then pulled her head away in amazement. "It's a bear."

"Yes, it is. A polar bear on an ice-flow. I have alerted the authorities that they should make haste and rescue it before it dies. I'm sure it is very hungry and very thirsty. It is a young male."

"Did it get lost?" *A stupid question. How would he know?*

"Grimsey has seen polar bears drift down on ice before when the summer is very warm. It does not happen too often, but this year, we have seen two. The first bear was very old, very large. He must have stayed alive for quite some time while he drifted. Alas, his thousand-mile journey did not end well, for he came to Grimsey too late. This little bear, however, I think the fleet will rescue him and return him home to a more solid ice shelf."

"The ice is melting. Global warming," Saber replied.

"Yes. And I watch for the bears as they are the symbol of Grimsey and I respect them dearly. But you did not come to listen to me speak of bears. You have come to learn more about Grimsey, yes?"

Saber nodded.

"Are you a bird watcher?" Gisli asked.

Saber shook her head. "Not really, no."

"I do not suppose you have a fascination with fishing in cold waters, then?" Gisli asked.

"No."

"Then how can I help you?" Gisli asked.

"I want to know about the necropants." She didn't. She came to find him, and here he was and now, for perhaps the first time in her life, she wasn't sure what to do with her lure. Reel it in or let it bob on open waters?

"Ah, you are a witch!" Gisli teased.

"No. I'm just curious," Saber replied.

"*Nábrók* are not for the curious. I think you came to see something else on this island," Gisli replied.

Saber choked. She tried to pull her hand away. He wouldn't allow it. "Oh, really? What makes you think that?"

"I saw you, too, you know. You, with your hair and skin and eyes like a moonlight night. In the reflection of the shop's window you looked like a reflection on a calm, dark sea." He held up her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. His kiss brought a tingle of warmth to her fingertips. "Be truthful with me. You came because you wanted to meet me. It took me almost ten minutes to get your attention, riding back and forth on the street. I wanted you to notice me. I invited you here."

Saber tried to pull her hand away. He shook his head. "No, dear one. Your hand is mine. Soon enough I hope you will give me more than just your hand, too."

Holy Mother of God this man is smooth. "Look, I admit it—I came here looking for you. I saw you get on the ferry and, all right, you are really attractive. I do want to get to know you. But Gisli, aren't you moving a little fast?" Saber replied.

"Grimsey makes men hard and honest. Brutally honest. It is our way. I say to you now, I want you—and I think you want me, too."

Casual sex on Grimsey? This is what I wanted. This is why I came. Come on, Saber. This is the opportunity of a lifetime. Screwing a blonde god across the Arctic Circle. "I did—I do. But..."

"Do not allow yourself to be swayed by fear and false morality, Saber. It dulls your shine."

"You wanna polish Saber, huh?" Saber asked.

"I see years of misuse have dulled your shine, Saber. There is perhaps, even some rust on your soul. A Viking likes his weapons honed and ready. Well-oiled, with a clean, sharp edge."

"I've got my grandmother's round corners, darling," Saber replied.

"Your curves may be the most dangerous weapon I've polished to date."

Saber smiled. Her hand had grown warm in his. "Right here? In front of the polar bears?"

He pulled Saber in and lightly ran his lips across hers. It wasn't a kiss. It reminded her of how a cat feels its way with its whiskers. He buried his mouth under her chin. His embrace felt commanding and powerful.

"I like your style, Gisli, but I don't even know how you like your coffee yet," Saber said, stifling a satisfied sigh as Gisli kissed her throat.

"You know how I like my coffee. I like it sweet, like the taste of your flesh against my lips," he replied.

"Yeah, but you don't even know how I like my eggs," Saber said. "In the morning."

Gisli took a deep breath, holding Saber's curls to his nose. "You like your eggs scrambled. Beaten with heavy cream, black pepper and dill."

"Good guess," Saber replied. She extended her neck and head to allow more room

for Gisli's whiskery kisses.

*

She knew she was stepping out of a frying pan named Rik and into a fire named Gisli. What did Rik expect from her besides sex? She'd have to put an end to it before it went any further if she was going to take up with this man of radiant perfection. She didn't want to turn this guy down. She'd crossed the damned Arctic Ocean to screw him. They both knew it, too.

The blonde god was one smooth son of a bitch. Saber had been courted and wooed and sought after by men all her life. Black men, Asian men, white men. Even some women had tried their hand at getting her into the sack—and one of them successfully—but never had she been swept off her feet and out of her right mind as quickly as she had been by this white-blond Icelandic with his brilliant blue eyes and funky sod house.

She entered the house by having to duck her head under a driftwood lintel. The outward appearance of Gisli's home screamed rustic, cold, drafty. She expected to see lambs grazing atop the grassy roof as they approached it, and hear their soft bleating while inside. The living quarters were astonishingly bright, cozy, warm, and modern.

"Oh, my God," Saber exclaimed as she entered the main room. "This place is huge."

"It is. And I am using only half of it for my home. The cavern was excavated by troupes of King Olaf Haraldsson of Norway in ten twenty-five. He very much wanted a military presence on Iceland. His builders settled in by hollowing out a small cave connected to a lava tube. They constructed this smashing little fortress inside the vestibule."

"Is this the best-kept secret in all of Iceland?" Saber asked. "This is incredible."

"I have modernized it, of course."

"You have satellite communications equipment. Christ—and a microwave. Yours is the first I've seen since I got here."

"I have Internet access, television channels from all over the globe and yes, this is a very well-kept secret. One you are obliged to hold sacred, as well."

"Are those Norse shields?" Saber asked, pointing to the pitched corners of the ceiling line.

"Replicas of the originals, alas. An earthquake damaged much of the original building materials. I salvaged what I could and did some retrofitting, you might say."

Saber walked around the comfortable room. A small fireplace in the center glowed softly—and the smell of roasted meat enticed her to seek its origin. "You have a roast in the oven."

"Lamb shank. Very tasty. And potatoes. Will you join me?" Gisli asked.

"No one makes beef pot roast around here, do they?" Saber replied.

"Beef? In Iceland? Surely, you jest. We have sheep—and many of them. It has another hour to cook. Do you think we can fill the time?"

Saber sat down on a decidedly IKEA-esque chair. "What about your polar bear?"

Gisli unzipped his windbreaker and pulled off the hoodie he wore under it. "He doesn't like lamb. They eat fish. A Norwegian fishing vessel is on the way to save him, anyway." He stripped off his basic white t-shirt, revealing a very well toned, if not very white, very smooth chest.

"Look, Gisli ... I'm flattered," Saber began.

Gisli knelt over her and silenced her with a kiss. "You should be."

He kissed her throat while his hands went to the soft folds of her sweater over her breasts. "You have beautiful skin. You are perfect. Like the midnight sun," he whispered. "I have never made love to a woman of color before. What do you call yourself?"

Saber shivered as his fingertips caressed her nipples over the smooth black wool. She forced a single word reply from between her lips before finding his mouth pressed against her mouth once again. "American."

Gisli dropped to his knees, taking her to the floor with him. He rolled atop her, straddling her, the weight of one of his legs atop her. "You are a melting pot of true American beauty. I could worship you."

He kissed her again. Then returned to the teasingly sensual nuzzling of her throat. She felt a slight pinch above her left clavicle. "Nibble nibble little mousey," she giggled. "You're a biter, huh?"

He didn't reply. Except by using firm, quick hands to strip her of her clothing.

Of course, she helped. She'd come to Grimsey to do him, after all.

An almost nightmarish sequence of images passed before her eyes as they made love. Floating in fog. Buoyant. High. *Am I drugged? Did he drug me?* Her mind was one place and her body was responding in another. Disconnected. She felt disconnected from herself. But every time she tried to speak, she found her mouth closed by lips, tongue, fingers, or penis of Gisli, the god.

She lost track of time. She barely recalled where she was; who she was. She willed herself to relax and enjoy the slow, deliberate motions of his groin to hers. That's when she noticed that, somehow, as he was doing her, he was also flicking at her clitoris with his tongue. It wasn't his dick inside her. It was a dildo. *He's using a dildo. Kinky.* She pondered the sensation. *No. That feels like the real deal down there.*

The flicking against her clitoris continued. *Damn. Boyfriend knows the drill.* She moaned. All wafting about in time and space came to an abrupt end as he pulled her down to earth, centering on that little bud between her legs. The place that was about to go nuclear.

He chuckled as Saber sighed and gripped at the arms of the chair. He chuckled in her ear. His head was at her shoulder. His lips were on her shoulder. *The freak is biting me! Oh, my God. Damn! Each flick of his tongue against the base of my throat feels as though it's happening way farther down the pike. In fact, a few more strokes like that last one and I am going to...*

Explode in a breath-sucking, body clenching, full-on, full-force orgasm.

Saber wanted to curl up into a ball as the first wave of pleasure hit. She envisioned curling into a fetal position because it hurt so damned good. He just kept thrusting and flicking and thrusting and flicking and there was no time to breathe as a second surge hit. She struck his shoulders with her hands, hoping he'd move away or come or something!

A hot knife into butter, man. This guy was doing her like a hot knife through butter. Last thing she knew, she'd melted. Someone come dip a lobster tail in her 'cause she'd been drawn and served.

* * * *

Saber awoke dressed and alone, her cheek pressed against a Formica tabletop. A little puddle of drool had formed, and the hand her head had rested on was wet, and asleep.

“Good morning. You know, the beds here are much more comfortable than the tables.”

Saber lifted her head and squinted to discern who dared speak to her through the pounding fog of a headache she had. “Hakkon? What the Hell am I doing here?”

“You wandered in last night, sat down with a pint and fell asleep. You looked so sweet with your curls in your beer that I left you,” Hakkon replied.

Saber stretched and stood. “I feel funky.”

“Your sweater is miss-buttoned. And where is your left shoe?” Hakkon asked. “Did you fall over a cliff on your way to meet with the Trustee?”

“He pushed me, I think,” Saber replied. “Do you have some coffee?”

“He’s quite elderly. I doubt he’d have the strength to push you over a cliff. Perhaps you came too close to a tern’s nest and were startled. It has happened, you know. You did not try to gather eider down or steal a puffin’s egg, did you?”

Saber approached the bar, finding each movement difficult and the very act of thinking painful. She took the steaming mug of coffee and drank.

“You are bleeding,” Hakkon said softly.

Saber lifted her lips from the rim of the cup. “What?”

“Your shoulder. You are injured. Here, allow me to help you.” Hakkon lifted the hinged flap on the bar’s top and came around to Saber’s side. Without asking permission or washing his hands or displaying his first aid card, he pulled Saber’s sweater down over her shoulder. Though she tried, she could not crane her head enough to see the wound.

“Well?” she asked.

“You have been punctured in two places. The blood is not fresh. You do not recall falling?”

“That son of a bitch bit me,” Saber cursed.

Hakkon frowned. “Hollo? You were bitten?”

“Yeah, by a snake in the grass,” Saber replied.

“There are no snakes in Iceland,” Hakkon replied rather matter-of-factly. “You wash your shoulder. I’m going to get some moss.”

Saber took another sip of coffee. *Moss? He’s getting moss?*

She slid off the barstool and behind the counter. Using a clean bar towel, she washed off her shoulder. It stung like a mother.

Hakkon walked back in a moment later. “This is Icelandic purple moss. It is full of natural healing. Pack it on the wound. I will use some cloth to bind it. In a day, you will be healed.” He passed a handful of wet purplish moss to Saber. She palmed it against the puncture wounds at the top of her clavicle.

“You keep the stuff outside your front door?” Saber asked.

“In Iceland there are five hundred forty-five types of moss. Grimsey is home to more than seventy varieties. It grows naturally. Even outside my door,” Hakkon replied.

“Thank you. Hey, you said the Trustee was old?”

“In his late eighties, I believe.”

Saber helped herself to another cup of coffee. “Does he have a grandson? Maybe a great-grandson, about thirty years old?”

Hakkon shook his head. “I don’t think so. He has a personal assistant, Jon. He no doubt met you at the signpost. The Trustee rarely leaves his home these days.”

“The sod house?” Saber asked.

Hakkon laughed. “A sod house?”

“Yes, built into a natural cave along the cliffs... “ she could see that Hakkon was ready to burst. “No sod house. Right?”

“There are cliffs if it makes you feel better. We have excellent cliffs. Some of the best in all Iceland. But there are no sod houses on Grimsey. At least not for centuries.”

“I didn’t fall, Hakkon. I’m pretty sure I didn’t fall. Is there a set up on the north side of the island to watch for polar bears?” Saber asked.

Hakkon choked on his own cup of coffee, the black nectar spraying outward as he laughed. “No, dear one. We don’t watch for polar bears. They arrive sometimes, but we don’t set a plate for them.”

Saber rubbed her eyes. “When’s the ferry?”

“An hour ago.”

“Crap!” Saber cursed.

“You can take the plane home. I secured you a seat. Send me a bank draft when you get back to Akureyri.”

“Thank you. When does it leave?” Saber asked.

“Finish your cup and head to the landing strip.”

“Where’s my bike?” Saber asked.

“You arrived last night without it,” Hakkon replied.

Saber looked at her shoeless left foot. “And my shoe?”

Hakkon shrugged. “You had quite an adventure, didn’t you? I hope, in some way, your curiosity about Grimsey has been quelled. Perhaps Prince Charming will find your shoe and return it to you.”

“Right.” Every muscle in her body ached—and made that fact acutely known to her as she tried to tidy herself up a bit before dragging her sorry ass to the landing strip. She pulled back her curls and twisted them into a bun, and straightened her clothing. “Do I look like the wild man of Borneo or am I socially acceptable to get off the plane in Akureyri?”

“You look as though you battled a *draugur* and lost.”

“Draugur. A ghost—or a witch with the unholy powers of *Nábrók*. Perfect.”

Hakkon put a large hand on Saber’s arm. “Draugur are great liars. They hide in plain site. They blend themselves to match their victim’s life. Do you know how to recognize a draugur?”

Saber laughed. “Whomever it is that lives in the sod house and spends his time watching for polar bears, is real. I have the bite marks to prove it. I think he was a *draugur*.” Saber took a quick inventory of her body. She didn’t feel as though she’d participated in rough sex. She’d been *there* a morning after or two, and this wasn’t one of those days. This was far more confusing—but definitely not a day of post-coital *hurts so good*. “How do I recognize one, Hakkon?”

“Their breath. It smells sulfuric when they wear the necropants. You must look for the mark on their hip. Like a brand. It is a runic symbol. Some modern witches have it tattooed on their left hip. In the past it was carved into the flesh or burned in. A brand.”

“I doubt I’m going to see an unclothed witch and get close enough to smell his or her breath any time soon.”

“Sometimes we choose our bed partners unwisely, no?” Hakkon laughed. “No matter. You are leaving us now and will stay away from witches with bad breath. All

right?”

“Thanks. I think I'll head back this way, however. I've a sod house to find.”

“You look for your ghost-house, my dear. When you find it, I shall get a license to rent it out to German tourists.”

“I'll talk to the owner for you. I think he likes me,” Saber replied.

“And how do you know that?”

Saber pressed her lips together, wondering if she should reveal her encounter. “He made love to me. Kind of.”

Hakkon smiled. “Yes, this explains much.”

Saber put her hands on her hips, feeling much like a defiant teenager. “I'm not crazy?”

“No, you are not. I think you ran into the den of a Hidden Folk. They have a way of playing with a person's mind. I, myself, have not served one of their kind in my pub for years,” Hakkon replied. “Others on Grimsey live have developed uneasy accords with them. I do not make bargains with trolls and gnomes. I just serve beer and hand out the room key to guests.”

“The young guy ... the Grimsey Trust guy...” Saber began. “May have been a pixie?”

Hakkon laughed. “A pixie? No, perhaps not—but *Huldafolk*, nevertheless. A good story for your children someday, no? About how you came to watch birds on Grimsey and were tricked into relations with a mystical being.”

“Yeah, there's one for the supper table. Look, thank you. I'm sure we'll meet up again. My work schedule allows me quite a bit of free time.”

“What is your business?”

“I'm a trainer for AlumaTrends. I'm really nothing more than a glorified computer technician.”

“For the company planning on changing things in the western fjords. I see. It is no wonder you were seduced by one of our elemental beings. It is said they are banding together to put a stop to the plant, you know.”

Saber nodded. “I've heard that.”

“You will be out of a job soon,” Hakkon whispered.

“A good geek can always get a job. Good-bye, Hakkon. And thanks,” Saber replied. “Bless,” she added, using the traditional Icelandic phrase when parting company.

Hakkon didn't look up from his barware. “Bless.”

Still missing one shoe, no doubt looking quite disheveled and feeling ridden hard and put away wet, Saber dashed to the landing strip. The plane was loaded, ready and waiting. Plane? It was the size of a tinker toy.

“Hakkon's guest?” the pilot confirmed. “What happened to you?”

Saber shook her head. “Don't ask.”

“Did you cross the circle?” he asked.

“Yeah, I did.” She looked around her nervously. It was a four-seat, itty-bitty airplane, which didn't look sturdy enough to jump a puddle much less an expanse of the Arctic Ocean.

Before she could react, the pilot grabbed her head and secured her left ear between his index finger and thumb. A moment later he pushed a needle through the lobe above her other piercing. She suppressed her initial knee-jerk reaction to avoid having the pilot's

strong grip rip her earlobe in half. “What the Hell was that for? Is the needle clean?” she yelled. “I was told the priest did the piercing, and I didn’t see him today!”

The pilot laughed. “I am the priest, and now you are a *wiking*. You have crossed the Arctic Circle on foot, and thereby, receive a mark. It is tradition. You can have the goldsmith in Akureyri re-pierce it for you. And yes, the needle is clean. I use them only once.” He passed Saber a box of tissue.

Holding a tissue to her ear, not sure if she should say thank you or bitch-slap the guy for assaulting her, Saber hunkered down into her seat and prayed that the plane would make it to Akureyri. She wasn’t ready to meet a polar bear on an ice flow face to face.

* * * *

Rik Vidarsson both loved and feared the man he still called “Pabbi,” and always strove to stay in his good graces. Sometimes, when a dark mood came upon his father, this was not such an easy task. He’d learned that his father’s word was law. No discussion. Only obedience.

Still, Rik trusted his father. A great bond of father to son existed in their lives and for his father to harm him or give him bad advice would have been both shocking and traumatizing. So, when his father announced they were taking a country drive, Rik did not question his father’s motives. “Pabbi,” he began. “I have a date tonight. We are so far out, so far away from Akureyri. I have concerns. This is the night I shall take the Cessna to Reykjavik.”

His father remained silent. He parked the car and bade Rik exit. The drive had taken them to Lake Myvatn—Mosquito Lake. Myvasveit was an area alive with bugs, sheep and volcanic activities of various natures. As they crossed the sulfur field, Rik could not help but wonder what his father was up to.

“Steinrikur,” his father replied. “I need your help with a project. My greatest discovery to date lies just ahead.”

“I am honored, of course, Pabbi, but would not one of your research assistants be better qualified to assist you?” Rik asked.

Vidar Gunnarsson, curator, archeologist, and blackheart, turned to face his son. “I need you.”

“Yes, sir,” Rik replied.

“Tell me of your date,” Vidar commanded as he and Rik gingerly maneuvered through the hard-baked earth around the bubbling sulfuric mud puddles.

“It is Saber. Our new neighbor.”

“A beautiful woman. She is American. And older,” Vidar replied. “You must use caution when with an older woman, son.”

“Too late for that, father,” Rik replied.

Vidar laughed. “My boy has become a man, I see. Well, this is good timing, for what I need you to do requires a man’s strength. Do not become too attached to Saber, however.”

Rik followed behind his father, fighting off the swarming gnats as they left the mud pit into an expanse of green calderas surrounding the area around the still-active volcano, Askja. Sheep nestled in the green shelves caused by millennia old lava flow. They watched with disinterest as Rik and his father trudged by.

“It is not too much further ahead of us, son.”

“This site has been thoroughly excavated and explored. I cannot imagine that anything of value remains in this place, save for its stark beauty. What did you find?” Rik asked.

“The Husavik runic bowl told of a spot here, near Krafla, at the base of Askja, where magic seeps up from the earth like a geyser. I found that site. It is quite impressive.”

“Magic? Real magic?” Rik asked. “Is it guarded by the Hidden Folk?”

“I have not seen one, but I think it is an outlet to their realm. The fumes seeping from the ground make me ill and I cannot breathe the vapors without suffocating. I am, for all my degrees and honors, not worthy.”

“And you believe I can?” Rik asked.

“I do.”

Another half-mile and Vidar stopped. “It is there. Just ahead. I have marked the area with a stone circle. You must enter the circle and wait for me there. Remove your clothing first.”

“Remove my clothing?” Rik asked. “What is this, Pabbi?”

“Do not disobey me, Rik. This is your path. Why you were born.”

“My destiny is to stand nude in a stone circle in a grass covered lava field teeming with gnats and sheep?” Rik asked. “I have been thinking journalism was my vocation all this time.”

“Go,” Vidar commanded.

The tone of his father’s voice alarmed Rik enough that he obeyed without further questioning. He stripped and walked toward the stone circle, swatting flies away from his privates.

There was nothing uncommon about the ground under the stone circle. It was grass. It was grass surrounded by stone and sheep dip, as were most of Iceland’s wilderness areas.

Though sheltered from much of the wind by the mounds, Rik shivered from the cold. “Father!” he called. “I am freezing. May I dress?”

“No. Not yet.” Vidar emerged from behind another mound, naked and holding something quite carefully in his arms. Something leathery, very delicate and thin.

“What have you there, Pabbi?” Rik asked.

“Put this on. You will be warmed by it,” Vidar replied.

Rik took the leathery item from his father. His stomach heaved as he recognized the shape of a lump on the front side. It was very clearly, a penis. Or what once was a penis. “Nábrók? Pabbi? Did you steal the necropants from your own museum?” He didn’t want the things in his arms, but knew better than to drop the extremely valuable artifact to the ground. “I am going to be quite ill. Please, take it away from me.”

“Put them on. I assure you, they will not tear and they will fit you perfectly, as if they were hand-tailored for you.”

“Pabbi, I do not wish to hold this insidious item much less wear it.”

“Do it.” Firm. Decisive. Unquestionable.

Rik retched as he donned the unholy breeches. He forced stomach bile back down his throat. It burned, making him gag all the more.

The ancient human flesh leather made his skin crawl. His hands began to perspire. Though he stood in a cold draft barely circumvented by lava pinnacles and earthen mounds, he began to sweat from a fever brought on by pure anxiety.

He coughed and choked, spitting to the side and breathing through his mouth as he slid the necropants up. They did, indeed, fit him like a glove. It felt disgusting.

Eyelets on the left side held sinewy straps for securing the breeches. He couldn't bring himself to tighten them.

"Why, Pabbi? Why make me wear these inhumane trousers?" Rik asked. He nearly leaped out of the circle as the ground under his feet vibrated and steam gently rose from the grass. It wafted about him, warming him.

"Stay inside the circle, Steinrikur. Stay inside the circle until I tell you to leave. No matter what happens." His father knelt outside the stones and lit a cigarette.

"You don't smoke, Pabbi," Rik said softly, feeling fuzzy and lightheaded—almost unable to vocalize his thoughts.

"I am sorry for this, but it is necessary," Vidar replied. He took the cherry-red end of the cigarette and touched the tip to his son's hip just above the unlaced closure of the necropants.

Rik screamed, but found himself unable to move. The steam had encased him like an iron maiden. The pain was excruciating. He could smell his own flesh burning under the touch of his father's cigarette.

"Be still," his father commanded. "The stave must be wrought perfectly in your flesh." He looked up into his son's red eyes. "I'm sorry, Steinrikur. The pain will soon end."

Rik tried to glance down, to show his father his tears, to view his charred flesh. The smell was overpowering. He could not move his neck. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but still his father continued the offensive, impossible act.

At last, Vidar stood. "It is done."

"Why? Why Pabbi?" Rik sobbed.

Vidar walked away, disappearing again behind a mound. He returned with a leather flask. "Drink," he commanded.

Desperate to please his father and be released from the magical bonds holding him, Rik took a hard swig of the liquid from his father's flask. It was warm, thick and salty.

Rik vomited red blood. "You feed me blood, Pabbi? Why?"

"Wait for it," Vidar replied. "You will be healed."

Rik gasped as the pain of the burns on his hip vanished and the disgusting corpse flesh trousers melted into his body. Suddenly, very suddenly, he understood. "I remember, Pabbi. Long ago, the journey to the western fjords..." Rik bowed his head. "I had forgotten." He knelt inside the stone circle. "I am the son of witches. We have a mission. How could I have forgotten these things?"

"The truth was hidden from you for fifteen years. I knew it was time to open your heart to your past when you began researching our kind in such diligent fashion I thought you'd find mention of your own grandfather is a *draugur* tale. We are the *draugur*, Steinrikur. And now, our most sacred artifact is returned to us and is worn, by you, our prince." Vidar placed his hands on his son's head. "You are my son and heir. You are the binding tie and stave of progression of the *draugur*. You are the destroyer of those who would oppose us. This is what you were born to do. You are the witch-child of darkness."

Rik stood. "I remember, Pabbi." He wept. He remembered all too well.

"Yes. The memories of your childhood initiation. Do you recall the pledge you made to walk with me in all things? To do my bidding as both your lord and your father? Do

you recall how to kill our enemies by tricking them into killing each other? These things you were taught long ago.”

Rik nodded. “I do.”

“Nábrók spoke to me when I first I touched them. The spirits of all *draugurs* from time immortal pressed me to awaken you. Time to rally you to the cause. We must not allow progress to slow. The men who come with their Euros and dollars to our land are pawns we must utilize, move, and control for our benefit. Do not allow the construction of the dam to be stopped. The waters will flood the homes of our enemies and we will rule the western fjords once again. But be wary ... an Old One is awake and seeking Nábrók. He has found his ally with humanity, too. And you have a date with her. Tonight.”

“Saber has been kissed by an Old One?” Rik asked.

“He smelled Nábrók on her because of my association with you, and lured her into his embrace. I cannot wear *these* pants in this family, Steinrikur. It is up to you to be a man and a witch, and bring the wealth of many nations to the western fjords.”

“Teach me what I must do, Pabbi,” Rik replied.

“She must die.”

“She won’t like that,” Rik replied.

Vidar shook his head. “Think, carefully, Steinrkur. Do not make light of this situation or attempt to shroud it in any way with humor. You must grasp the truth of our kind. She must die. I wanted to wait until she had handed over the final codes to AlumaTrends, but now that she has been seduced by an Old One, she must be dealt with immediately.” He handed his son the flask. “Drink.”

Rik cringed. “It’s blood.”

“Sheep’s. Yes. You must consume it to keep Nábrók happy. They appear as your flesh when well-hydrated. Do not let them wither, or you will turn to dust with them.”

“Happy pants?” Rik asked. “Pabbi, please remember this is the twenty-first century, not the tenth. Happy pants sounds so superstitious in nature to be almost comical.”

“Magic has no boundaries in time or space. What was magic in the tenth century is magic now. You don’t want to make Nábrók unhappy. Look where you stand. You stand on the entrance to the underworld and are surrounded by Satan’s own breath, you drink the warm blood of a sheep and plan the demise of our enemy. Magic is strong in Iceland. The *draugur* are strong because of it. Drink. Now.”

Rik lifted the flask to his lips. “It is disgusting.” He spat red after swallowing.

“Pabbi, I thought Hekla was considered to be the gateway to the underworld, any way. It is much more of a romantic tale than a stone ring at Myvasveit surrounded by sheep dip. And Pabbi, I like Saber. Is there no other way?”

“Medieval folklore would have the world believe Hekla is the key, but it is not. The runes on the Husavik bowl tell a different story. I found this vortex from their directions to it, but could not enter it. It wanted *you*. So I say now, to you, the chosen one, it is better to drink the warm blood of a sheep than to have Nábrók suck the life out of you, starting with your penis. So, drink well and often, and do not test me with stupid questions.”

Rik took a hard swig of warm blood from the flask. He shuddered as he forced the thick, chunky liquid down his throat. “I am burned with a witches’ mark?” he asked.

“I have marked you with the stave of the necropants. All witches bear a mark. It was

necessary,” Vidar replied.

“And so is the death of Saber Evangelista,” Rik replied, a single tear rolling down his stained face. “I am saddened by this turn of events in my life.”

Chapter Two

Saber felt like she'd been through a rock tumbler as she stepped off the puddle jumper. No wonder Rik had told her to take the ferry. Arctic winds vs. late-model four-seat airplane. No contest. Wind wins.

Bruised, sore, and feeling stupid as hell for not knowing exactly what happened with Gisli, Saber took a taxi back to the house.

She hopped into the shower, planning to clean up and take a nap.

Oddly, the moss had helped heal whatever the hell it was she'd done to her shoulder. The marks were clear, however. Two puncture wounds graced the flesh of her clavicle. Yeah, he'd bitten her. Saber pounded her fist against the bathroom sink. Bite marks meant tests and more waiting periods to see if she'd contracted Hep or HIV. No ... Iceland has very, very low incidences of STD's. Unless he's been putting the bite on every damned tourist, I'm probably all right. Better find a doctor to test me, anyway. Jesus Christ. What do I say? Hi, I was molested by a pixie who took a bite out of my shoulder. Can I have an HIV test, please? Fuck.

She wrapped a red bath sheet around her and stepped out of the steamy bathroom.

"Well, don't you look handsome," Rik said.

"Hi, Rik. I didn't hear you come in," Saber replied. She wasn't surprised to have someone enter the house without knocking. After all, it was Iceland.

"I saw the taxi drop you off. Did you find what you were looking for on Grimsey?" he asked.

Saber walked into her room. Rik followed.

She held the towel tightly around her. "Would you mind if I get dressed?" she asked.

"No, I don't mind." Rik smiled.

I have a damned puppy dog on my heels. "I meant in private."

"Do you have something to hide from me, Saber?" Rik asked.

"Yes. Many things. Now, please step out." She waved her long fingers toward her bedroom door. "Come on, Rik. Give a girl a break."

"What happened to your throat? On your collar bone?" Rik asked. "Did you injure yourself?"

"I did. I went over a cliff, lost the bike and one of my shoes, and was subsequently attacked by gulls which pecked these holes into my shoulder."

Rik approached Saber and ran his fingertips over the bruised, torn flesh. "They look like bite marks to me."

Saber coughed. Rik's body odor smelled rank. "You been working out or something?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. I know, I need a shower. I went with my father to *Haverarond* and I have not yet washed."

"No wonder you smell like hard boiled eggs. Hanging out in sulfuric mud pits will do that to a person," Saber replied.

"I'll come by at six o'clock to take you to dinner. My father's pilot will take us," Rik said.

Saber glanced at her alarm clock. "Pilot? You were serious about going to the Pearl?"

In Reykjavik? I thought we were just going to eat here somewhere.”

“We have reservations for half-past eight tonight. I was quite serious, Saber. Dress appropriately, of course. I would be happy with you wearing nothing but that lovely red towel, but the Pearl does have a dress code,” Rik replied.

Saber nodded. *Man, I did lose time on Grimsey.* “Yes. Thank you. I’ll see you at six.”

“I think you should take a nap, Saber. Unless I am mistaken, you tried to out-drink the local fisherman and lost while on Grimsey.”

“That’s pretty much it, Ricky. I think I will take a nap.”

“Shall I tuck you in?” Rik asked.

“After you take a shower, maybe.” She blew Rik a kiss. “See you later.”

She walked Rik out of her bedroom and waited until she heard the front door close before pulling on a nightgown and crawling into bed. Another fucking ride on a puddle jumper. What is it with me and small airplanes? And since when did Rik’s dad get his own pilot?” With no one home to reply to her questions, Saber settled into her bed, grateful that she had the time to take a nap. Then reality hit. “Fuck! I have to work tomorrow!”

She reached over and set her alarm to go off in an hour.

She couldn’t sleep.

Every time she tried to get comfortable, she found a new sore spot. She felt like *Indiana Jones* in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Where doesn’t it hurt? Try the eyelids. Or the elbow. Nope, the elbow hurts, too. She’d banged it up against the Jacuzzi when she and Rik had done the nasty in the hot water.

She watched the minutes tick by on her clock, eyes wide open, comforter pulled up to her chin. It was broad daylight; birds were singing and she was sure that she heard the sound of grass clippers buzzing away somewhere.

She sprang from bed, exhausted from trying to nap, and flipped open her laptop. Her start-up music was “I Owe My Life to the Company Store.” Appropriate. Sarcastic.

She clicked on her work email account. Somewhere high in space a satellite whirled to life. AlumaTrends had its own satellite. Flippin’ prestigious sons of bitches running the show wanted zero delay time in their orders getting out to the front lines. She had ninety-seven unread emails. Not too bad.

She opened the one from her secretary in Seattle first. Always first. Secretarial emails come before all others.

It was her appointment and training schedule for the next day. The hard hats had arrived and were set up in Husavik—about an hour from Akureyri. She had two training classes to teach. Ten and Two. Thank God she didn’t have to get up at the crack of dawn—whenever the hell that was in a land of twenty-four hour daylight—and drive a rental car into places unknown. If she left at nine, she’d make it in plenty of time.

Saber replied to the email with a “Confirmed” symbol her employers used to speed things up. No chit-chat via email at AlumaTrends.

She opened up the engineer’s email next. He’d uploaded photos of the site. She’d never seen it—as the job didn’t require her to travel to the fairly inaccessible western fjords. That was hardhat territory. And, apparently, a sacred area to the Hidden Folk. The eager-beaver wanted to show off and gain admittance to the “pass-code” hand-off ceremony by wooing her with computer-enhanced images of before and after. Such a

dick. Saber rolled her eyes.

Saber clicked the images into slide-show mode. The slide show began with breathtaking aerial photography of the wilderness to be dammed and flooded to provide electricity for the smelter. Under the photo a small caption read: *Western highlands. Mapped by Ice-Age (beta).*

Saber clicked on the next photo. It was an overview of the area to be affected by the dam and smelter. Iceland's Grand Canyon would be partially submerged, a major river channel flooded and re-routed, and thousands of acres of undeveloped land would be submerged.

The wound at the base of her throat began to twitch. She rubbed the spot and pulled away fingers stained with blood. "Damn it!" Saber swore. She stood to get a tissue and collapsed as a rush of dizziness overwhelmed her.

*

She sat astride Gisli, sliding her mound over his shaft. Her wrist was against his lips. He was taking her blood. She watched as a trickle of blood made a little rivulet across his bearded chin. A stream of red in a sea of blonde. She pulled her wrist away from his lips and pressed her mouth against his, tasting her own saltiness.

He reached between them and positioned his member for a nice drive home. Saber pulled herself upright and began squat-thrusts atop Gisli. "I need to quit my job," she whispered—the comment not seeming odd or out of place at all. "What they're doing is wrong. What I created for them is wrong."

"You need to stay and change their minds," Gisli replied. He grabbed Saber's hips and manipulated the depth and speed of their union.

"I can't," Saber replied breathlessly. "I'm just one person."

Gisli held her hips firmly against his own, not allowing her to move. The torturous agony of not being able to work out her blossoming orgasm forced a low, guttural moan from her throat. "Let go!" she begged.

"Promise me you'll change things. *A great human revolution in just a single person will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will cause a change in the destiny of all humankind,*" Gisli quoted. He thrust his hips up, causing Saber to cry out again.

"You're killing me, Gisli. Please," Saber begged. "Let me come."

"As powerful an orgasm as you have now, so shall be your desire to change the course of AlumaTrends. Do you understand?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes. I understand." Saber moved furiously atop Gisli as he released her hips. His vice-like grip had pinioned them together like solder to iron, but released, she rode him for all he was worth. She reached her right hand between her legs and caressed her clitoris against his shaft as she climaxed. Her fierce up and down rocking motions pulled him off a moment later. He moaned and dug his fingertips into her thighs as he poured hot into her. She collapsed onto his chest. He pulled her head up to his mouth and slipped her newly pierced ear between his lips. As she trembled against him, he bit open her physical souvenir of crossing the Arctic Circle, and fed.

*

Saber awoke on her bedroom floor, again in a puddle of drool and freezing cold.

She dizzily pulled herself to her knees. It was five-thirty. Morning or afternoon? She had no idea. The sky looked the same no matter what time of day it was. She smelled

potatoes cooking on the stove, their starchy odor wafting about the house like a poor man's perfume. Evening. Kristjana is making supper. All righty then.

Saber gingerly rose to her feet and moved to sit down on the bed. The scatter rug on the floor was stained with blood. She felt her ear. Yes, it was bleeding. She looked at her wrists. No bite marks. It hadn't been real.

She reached between her legs and winced. Hard, fast sex. Only hard, fast sex could leave her that raw and tender. "It was freakin' real. Goddamn Icelandic faeries are messing with me!"

Saber ran her hands through her hair and gripped two handfuls forcefully holding them out like bat wings. "Faeries? What am I thinking?" She sighed and bent her head down to her knees. *Rik must have snuck in here and did me while I was out, the shit. Yes—that's got to be it. He couldn't wait until we were on that puddle jumper flying across the Icelandic tundra.*

She headed back to the shower for a quick rinse then dressed for dinner, her teal silk East Indian-style pantsuit with the long duster and nice gold brocade flats. She wore a thong and strapless bra so that the straps wouldn't show through the delicate woven shoulder decorations. She pulled her hair back and secured it with a scrunchie the same color as her suit. She quickly applied some cosmetics, making sure she repacked what might get smeared if she and Rik had dessert first.

*

Rik felt remarkably ill. He stroked his thighs, feeling only his own warm, after-shower flesh, but knew, in gut-wrenching truth, that he was actually stroking the flayed skin of a man long dead and buried. He did not wish to disobey his father. But he did not wish to fulfill his mission as a witchling prince and kill the lovely Saber.

He scraped his fingernails along his hip, hoping to pry away the necropants in their illusory state. He succeeded only in creating a gash across his own flesh. He watched in horror as the blood beading to the surface was suddenly sucked back inside.

Rik turned and vomited into his waste bin.

Nábrók rippled against his skin, creeping and scurrying around like an errant flea or louse.

Feeling a panic attack coming on, his chest tightening and brow perspiring heavily, Rik curled up into a ball, and wept.

He didn't pray. He hadn't been to church since his confirmation. He had given very little thought to heaven and hell and those who rule them.

As he lay under his duvet, nauseated and frustrated, he came to realize that there must truly be a God, for his father—*his father*—was the Devil. How else could he have bade his only son to wear dead man's trousers? And commit murder for the sake of Iceland's industrial revolution?

I will kill myself before I kill Saber, Rik thought. *Nábrók* tightened its punishing grip around his privates. Rik gasped and brought his knees up to his chin as he writhed in agony. Even his thoughts had to be censored or *Nábrók* would crush his testicles in an unholy vice-grip. It would take one swift action, without too much forethought, to be freed. But before he killed himself, he planned on making love to Saber again. And again. He'd have to kill himself before she did at any rate—should she discover he wore the necropants. What woman wouldn't be repulsed and horrified to have been violated by a dead man's member? Yes ... better he kill himself before she has the chance.

*

He arrived promptly, driving daddy's nice German car. Wearing a dark blue suit, he looked much older than his eighteen years. "You ready to fly with me, Saber?" he asked.

"I think you already took a trip around the world today, huh?" she replied, sliding into the passenger seat of the car.

"What?" Rik asked.

"I had low blood sugar or something. I passed out on my bedroom floor. You are one naughty boy, Ricky. Doing a girl while she's down like that. If you wanted to play out a little rape fantasy, you could have asked," Saber replied.

"I'm not sure I understand. Are you saying we had sex? In your room?" he asked.

"Yes."

Rik slid into the driver's side and closed the door. "I do not consider rape worth fantasizing about. Six black women in a hot tub, maybe ... but never rape. And although I was hoping to make love to you tonight at some point, I have not yet had the pleasure for today."

"I guess I dreamed the whole thing," Saber replied, ignoring the sneaking suspicion in her gut that the entire incident had been, indeed, real.

"I am flattered that you dream of having sex with me. I'd pull over this car and feel my way around that lovely blue silk you are wearing if we didn't have dinner reservations on the other side of the country."

"Keep your hands on the wheel there, buckaroo. Plenty of time for love later. How big is your father's plane?" Saber asked.

"The museum owns a Cessna Skyhawk SP. My father said I may commandeer it for the evening."

"That's a little bigger than a puddle jumper, isn't it?" Saber asked. "It seats four passengers comfortably, right?"

"Yes. And there is a privacy screen between the pilot and the cabin," Rik replied.

"And the back two seats fold down."

"Are you trying to get into the mile high club, Ricky?" Saber asked.

"Yes. And there is something else I want, too," he replied.

"What's that?" Saber asked.

"I'd like you to blow me as I drive the car. Put your head in my lap and give me oral pleasure."

Saber wasn't sure how to reply. "We are having a purely sexual relationship, right? I mean, giving you head in the car won't make us engaged in some Icelandic custom I know nothing about?"

"I want you for your body, Saber. Nothing more. I'm eighteen and until a few days ago, was a *wirgin*. I applied myself quite diligently to my studies in school and did not make time for girlfriends. I would like to have as much sexual experiences as possible with you before I move away to go to University. Please don't be offended if I do not wish to marry you."

Saber withheld a burst of laughter. "Can you move the steering wheel up a bit?"

Chapter Three

She hadn't done it since high school, but walking the tight rope of giving head to a driver of a vehicle, in traffic, and not getting her prom dress sticky could be done. Saber knew to watch for signs of eruption; the hand on the stick shift, clenched and with white knuckles, the increase in speed, the shallow breathing of the driver. "Pull over," she demanded. There was no way she was going to let Rik orgasm while maneuvering a round-about.

He pulled into the parking lot of the Hagkaup grocery store. He put the car in park and leaned back while Saber finished the job.

He wasn't sure how he would subdue her. Would he strangle her as she sucked him, or beat her to death outside the car? What about the tire iron? He should have brought a knife or strong rope. His hands would have to suffice. Of course, it would go better for him if he just slit his own throat first. Killing Saber would just make her angry. The rage of a black woman wronged by a man—Rik was sure any pain the necropants could dish out would be less traumatic than what Saber could muster—even dead.

Saber grabbed a conveniently placed box of tissue at the exact right moment and stroked Rik's orgasm into it. "Any other things you want to try out?" she asked, sitting up. She rolled down the window and tossed the tissue out. She then opened her purse, popped a breath mint into her mouth and reapplied her lipstick.

Rik had not yet said a word. His breathing had slowed some, but Saber was fairly certain his heart rate was still a tad too high for him to drive.

"That was incredible," Rik whispered. *And I'm so sorry to have deceived you! Please forgive me. I want you so desperately. I am an inhuman cad.*

"Quite credible, I dare say," Saber replied. "Here, have a *Tic Tac* and let's get going."

Rik zipped his fly and set off toward the airstrip. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, Ricky. Anything to warp the youth of Iceland. Incidentally, what kind of soap did you use to wash up with? It has an interesting aroma."

Rik choked. "Interesting?"

"Yeah, interesting. Not in a bad way, Ricky. It's just not how you usually smell." Saber paused. "I know, I'm weird. I have a keen sense of smell. You usually come off smelling like Ivory soap. Today you have more of an earthy scent."

"It's because I am a man now. You saw to that—and my father has also given me more responsibilities. Adult responsibilities. Some of them of quite a serious nature. The errands he wishes to send me on are of questionable legality—but that is the nature of business, from what I understand."

"I see. Well, don't get too sucked into the underworld of big business, Ricky. Been there. Done that. And I'm getting out while my soul is still intact," Saber replied.

*

The airplane was *fine*. "Is your father wealthy or just plain filthy rich?" Saber asked, buckling herself into one of the very nicely appointed leather seats.

Rik shrugged. "I suppose he is. He has a position of some authority in Iceland and is well paid for his services. He's a consultant of sorts. I'm finding out new things about my

father every day. He is quite the busy body, traveling all over Iceland for his research.”

“Well paid for his services? The man has use of a private jet for his son to use on a date. That’s more than just well paid!”

“Powerful men need powerful allies. My father has friends in high places. And someday, so shall I.”

“Taking over daddy’s business?” Saber asked.

“I have no skills as an archeologist or curator. I’m going to run AlumaTrends someday.” He paused and turned his head to look directly into Saber’s eyes. “I’m going to be your boss in a few years.”

Saber raised her eyebrows. “What happened to journalism?”

His eyes widened as he caught an odor of goodness emanating from her. He cringed. Damned Old One. Foul being of light. “I am destined for greater things. My father is going to have me apprenticed next year. I shall attend University and learn the business side of the aluminum trade.”

“All these changes in two days’ time. You’re growing up awfully fast, Ricky. I’m thinking of looking for a different line of work, any way,” Saber replied. “My presto-change-o act for the last forty-eight hours.”

Rik laughed. “Why?”

“Well, I’ve decided not to hand over the pass-code for my computer program to AlumaTrends. What they’re doing is wrong. I mean ... it could be done well—but how they want it done is wrong. Jobs are great—but the environmental impact is horrendous. Do you know they plan to flood the great rift in the western fjords? I can’t believe that I was so blind. And the trouble I’m going to be in—I’m sure to get sued. I’m giving my resignation tomorrow.”

“You took the transfer from Seattle knowing what the job entailed, did you not?” Rik asked.

Saber didn’t like his tone. She found it scolding and accusatory. “You know, I never gave it much thought until recently. I wanted to get away from Seattle, have always been fascinated with Iceland, and when the opportunity to travel for my company arose, I leapt at the chance. I now have a one-year consultant contract with AlumaTrends, for better or worse. I think it’s going to get worse. Worse by my own hand. But, I think the corporate planners are wrong and I’m going to say something. They can’t beat the pass-code out of me. They don’t own something I’ve never written down. It’s intellectual property. And I’ve decided it’s not for sale. I need to read my contract again. There must be a way out. If not, I’m in for some major legal fees.”

“The new plant will open up new jobs to many Icelanders now languishing due to the restraints on the fishing industry,” Rik replied.

“That’s true—but the cost is so great and dear. I saw photographs of the area to be flooded. It’s magnificent. AlumaTrends should develop a new energy source—or tap into a very old one—to power their plant. That, I would help with.”

Rik fiddled with his window shade as he replied, “Hydrogen fuel cells, solar power, wind, and tidal power have been considered.”

“I think they should run a pipeline to the hot springs outside Isafjordur and use steam to generate the electricity to run the plant.”

Rik nodded. “By damming the river and flooding part of the canyon, the electricity can be generated much sooner than by building a new steam channel.”

“Cheap electricity versus the destruction of Europe's largest wilderness expanse. I feel like an instructor for a group of physicians about to begin systematic pregnancy terminations on a group of virgins.”

“If you don't train the workers how to use their computer-guided system, someone else will,” Rik replied. “You might as well accept your lot in this and do your job as well as you can.”

“Or I can bloody-well quit.”

“You'll lose your work visa if you leave your job. Do you want to return to Seattle so soon? What makes you so environmentally-minded all of a sudden?”

“I'm a good consultant and trainer. I could find work. And I guess I'm just having a change of heart. It's allowed, you know. The more I learn about what AlumaTrends wants to do to this country, the more sickened I am.”

“It's not your country,” Rik replied softly.

“Iceland gets under your skin, Ricky. I belong here. That doesn't mean I want to give up my US citizenship or change my name to Nathansdottir—but I love it here.”

“I think you have been seduced by the *Huldufolk*, Saber. You speak as if you were one of their worshippers—always making love to the grass and rocks. When you were on Grimsey, did you meet anyone in particular? Perhaps someone as white as a ghost?” Rik asked.

“I met the inn keeper; a personal assistant to the manager of the Grimsey Trust and some crazy dude watching polar bears. And that was half the population.”

“Grimsey Trust.” Rik said the words with obvious contempt. “The administrator is an adversary of my father.”

“Why?” Saber asked. She glanced out the window of the plane. They were passing over the Myvatn Lake area. Blue and green rolling hills and thousands of cinder cones and calderas dotted with little white flecks—sheep—looked extremely surreal from above.

“The Trust wished the necropants immediately destroyed when it was discovered. The Trust sent henchmen to stop my father. My father, however, had the authority of the government to excavate the site and the Trust had no right to interfere,” Rik replied.

“Bad blood there, huh? Is the Trust responsible for the theft?”

“No. The Trust is not responsible.”

“You found the culprit?” Saber asked.

Rik nodded. “After a fact, yes. I know who has the necropants. They are safe, and being used as they were intended. Unfortunately for the wearer, I might add.”

Saber closed her eyes tightly. The motion of the plane had sent her stomach rumbling. “That's sick. You told me yourself that a witch wants to wear them to become master of the universe or something.”

“Or something, yes,” Rik replied.

She peered out the window. “Look, we're over Askja. It's steaming!”

“It is an active volcano. It could erupt at any time,” Rik replied.

“Like you?” Saber asked. She took his right hand in hers and placed it over her bosom. “How much time do we have before we land?”

“It takes only an hour to fly across the whole of Iceland, Saber. We have about forty minutes,” Rik said. He traced his fingertips over Saber's peaked nipples.

“So what's stopping you?” Saber asked. “Wanna?” She slipped out of her silks and

turned slowly before Rik, displaying her lovely push-up bra and thong. “You like?”

He nodded. “You have the marks of a blood-sucker, Saber.”

“I fell down an embankment.”

“No, I think a *wampyr* made love to you and made you his,” Rik said. He wasn’t undressing.

Feeling rather vulnerable and losing the mood, Saber replied rather tersely, “I’m nobody’s bitch, baby.”

Rik reclined in his seat. “I think you have had another Icelfander between your sweet thighs. Come closer. Let me examine you.”

“Examine me?” Saber asked.

Rik cupped the rise in his suit pants. “I have the instrument to examine you right here.” He unzipped his fly.

“Yeah, baby. Now that’s what I’m talking about.” Saber stood, straddling Rik’s legs. His dick was in his right hand and his left was busy between her legs, making ready his pathway.

As he stroked his member, relishing the warmth of Saber’s mound against it, he felt *things* go a bit dry. A small silver flask in his pocket shifted and began to echo his heartbeat. He needed a nip to keep things fresh. He shook with pain as he realized that his body was truly, no longer his own. As long as he wore the breeches, he acted on their behalf.

He reached his right hand into his pocket and deftly unscrewed the cap. *Is it better to be the right hand of the devil than to be in his way?* He lifted the container to his lips. *It is not better.*

“What have you got there, Ricky?” Saber asked, moving against his still-prying fingers.

“Nothing you would like. It is a very strong drink. Made from traditional ingredients.”

“Lemme have some,” Saber begged.

“I think not. I will let you have some of this, however.” He pulled her onto his lap. “Ride me, Saber.”

Saber backed away. “No baby, this time you do me.” She dropped to her knees and bent over the seat, displaying her round bum.

Rik laughed and moved into a comfortable position behind her. “Ah, we are hounds tonight, are we?”

“Yeah, come on, Ricky. Do it.”

He moved the thin thong aside and touched the head of his penis to her anus. Saber moaned. “Take the elevator to the next floor, mister.”

Rik laughed and teased them both by pressing the head of his shaft just barely into Saber’s vagina.

Saber moaned. “Hand me that flask, Rik.”

Rik looked at his capped flask, containing the precious blood he needed to keep the necropants from going dead-flesh on him. “No, Saber. I’m sure you will not like it.”

He pushed his way into her.

Saber moaned and reached for the flask. She took a swig before Rik could stop her. She held the liquid in her mouth for a moment, then began looking around for something to spit it out into.

Rik pulled away, panicked. “Saber, don’t spit it out! Not on my father’s leather seats. Put it back. Put every drop back into the flask!”

Saber withheld a gag reflex as she dribbled the contents of her mouth back into the flask. “What the hell, Ricky? Is this blood? Whose?”

“It is blood. It is an initiation for University. Do not be alarmed. It is from a sheep, not a freshman.”

“Jesus Christ, Rik. Where can I get cleaned up?” she asked. *God damn. I should really go after older men. College fucking boys!*

“I said you would not like it. Next time, please do listen to me. There’s a small restroom near the cockpit,” Rik replied.

Saber rose, dramatically waving her arms. “God damn college boy pranks. Make the new kids drink fucking sheep’s blood. Jesus Christ!” The plane hit an air pocket and she toppled back onto the seat, spilling the flask, sending the blood everywhere. “Shit. I’m sorry. I’ll go get some towels.”

Rik choked back tears. He could not weep over spilled blood. Of course, he needed the blood to retain the illusion of the necropants into flesh. Soon enough, they would begin to tighten and wither, taking him with them as they crumpled into dust.

As Saber used the restroom and searched for clean bar towels, Rik picked up the flask and drained the last drops of blood from it. He blotted up what he could with his handkerchief. Unless he could squeeze blood from the hankie later in the evening, he was going to have to do the unthinkable and take blood from a living being. He wondered if he could drink his own blood. Would that not suffice?

*

Saber did not relish tight, confined spaces—such as airline restrooms. Give her the size of an Amtrak handicapped restroom for traveling, any day. She had her grandmother’s curves, and those curves did not like being cramped or confined when using the facilities one bit.

She washed her hands and tried to do a little acrobatic maneuver to clean up down below in case she decided to give Rik another go. Was he worth it? A boy who carried a flask of sheep’s blood? Yeah. He was a good man. He’d make a great lover. But the blood ... Jesus Christ!

She poured a drop of liquid soap onto her fingertip and touched it to her tongue. “Grandma says that’s for the potty mouth,” she whispered. “And to wash away that awful taste.” The soap burned and tasted nasty. What was her world coming to when she was punishing herself with soap in the mouth for using bad language? *Maybe I am possessed by some goody-two-shoes, fabulous blonde vampire, polar-bear watching son of a bitch. Damn. More soap needed.*

She looked into the mirror, wishing she’d brought her handbag in with her. She smoothed back her unruly curls and wiped the lipstick that had dried in the corners of her full lips. Using a tissue she blotted the smeared eyeliner.

“Fabulous, as always,” she said to her reflection. The plane hit more turbulence and the cabin lurched. Saber reached for the sink and held on, her eyes closed. She felt herself being pulled into a downward spiral. A sensation she recognized as having occurred all-too-recently. “Damn. Not again,” she whispered, before succumbing to the vibrations over taking her.

His blonde head was at her mound, and his tongue was going to town. Saber clutched

his head, finding it difficult even to breathe as the first wave of orgasm struck.

She came forcefully, holding his face to her body for dear life. When she relaxed, he didn't. She felt a twinge of pain on her vulva. He'd bitten her again. "Damn vampire pixie!" Saber swore. "Get out of my head!"

"The name is Gisli, and I am not a pixie."

"Why do you keep haunting me?" Saber asked. "I mean, can't a lady use the restroom without being bled by a vampire these days?"

"We are connected through your blood, Saber. I need you to set in place a plan to protect Iceland from developers and the sacred lands of the Hidden Folk."

"What about the sex? You keep sexing me."

Gisli smiled. "I am enjoying that part of the connection, very much."

"I'm not! Admittedly, I saw you and wanted to jump your bones, but darling, I'm not sure you're even real!"

"I am real. But we are no longer two beings. We are one."

Saber tightened her jaw. "Get out of my head, Gisli. Get out of my head and let me be about my business. I have a fucking country to save here, after all." She sat down on the closed toilet. "That's not me, is it? That's what *you* want me to do. You want the country saved from some necropants wearing bitch witch and I somehow got trapped in the middle of your scene."

"The necropants are working their magic on the witch as we speak. Though this witch is not inclined to acts of violence, *Nábrók* are all-controlling," Gisli replied.

"So make her take them off. You're a vampire! Don't you have super human powers?" Saber asked.

"I'm not that kind of vampire. I am a shifter. I am able to share a host body and move that person to do good acts."

"Good acts, my ass. You've messed me up, Gisli." Saber reached out and squirted another drop of liquid soap onto her finger. "Look at this! I feel compelled to wash my mouth out with soap whenever I swear. That's you, isn't it? Freakin' good-guy vampire. Only in Iceland!"

Gisli laughed. "It is my influence, yes. As I said on Grimsey, I am polishing your life. But truly, Saber, I am only tapping the goodness already in you. Now, please, listen to me carefully, for you are in danger."

"What? The witch in her Dolce and Gabbana dead man's trousers is going to fly by on her broomstick?"

"You keep referring to the witch as *she*. You do know, in Icelandic, there is no word to describe a male witch, so the term is used for both sexes," Gisli replied.

"Warlock. In English, we call them warlocks."

A knock on the restroom door startled Saber out of her inner-communion with Gisli. "Yes?" she replied.

"I would like to use the water closet before we land, Saber," Rik said.

"I'll be out in a minute," she replied.

Saber closed her eyes again. "Gisli? You there?" she whispered. No response. Saber unlocked the door and stepped out. Rik smiled politely and entered the cubical before she'd even fully crossed the threshold. "Gotta go, huh?"

She strolled back to her clothing and dressed. "Gisli?" she asked again. Nothing.

Saber belted herself into her seat, glancing nervously out the window—for signs of

black hats and broomsticks.

Chapter Four

Saber felt pretty skanked-out after the blood fest on the plane. She had dinner at a three-hundred-dollar a plate restaurant coming up with a hot red-head who wanted to do her every which way but loose, a flippin' shifter-vampire moving in her veins and she'd grown a damned conscience over AlumaTrends' business practices—all this led to one conclusion: she needed a drink. Maybe tying one on would relieve her of her Icelandic demons. Of course, they could probably drink her under the table. This was Iceland, after all.

The Pearl—*Perlan*, with its revolving restaurant built under a sparkling glass dome built over hot water tanks atop a hill, was probably the most unusual venue to eat fish in all Europe. Surrounded by pleasantly wooded footpaths leading to a natural geothermal beach, the place had both a magical and high-class feel to it.

Rik and Saber entered through the atrium, below the dome and above the hot water tanks. The wax museum was closed, but they could still peer through the bars at the magnificent statues of Vikings and early Icelanders. “Yo, Ricky ... that your great-grandfather over there?” Saber teased.

“Considering we can trace our lineage back to the year one thousand, chances are *very* good, it is.” The dryness of the necropants was causing him some discomfort. “Dear one,” Rik began. He wanted to tell her. Wanted desperately to disobey his father and tell Saber the entire, sordid tale. The words escaped him. “I’m afraid I must use the closet again, Saber. Would you be all right if I leave you for a moment?”

Saber laughed. “I’m not going anywhere, Ricky. Unless Witchipoo shows up on her VvroomBroom, I’m good.”

Rik squinted and leaned forward, an obvious look of confusion on his face, “Witchipoo?”

“Never mind. I’ll wait here by your wax homeboys. You hurry back,” Saber replied.

Rik kissed her quickly on the cheek and headed off in the direction of the public restroom on that level, the necropants tightening and chaffing him with each step.

He brought his hand to his mouth as he walked across the level. He dipped into a stall and bit the fleshy part of his palm beside the thumb. He drew blood and pulled enough for one good swallow. It had no affect on the necropants.

He unzipped his trousers and pulled his briefs away from his body. The flesh of his abdomen and privates had grayed and wrinkled. His penis seemed to have shriveled into nothingness. This would never do. Sacred vow notwithstanding, he could not go through life with the flaccid penis of a dead man. Not when he’d just learned how to use it properly! He stripped off his trousers and shorts and attempted to peel away the dead man’s breeches. They held fast like a boot forced upon too small a foot. *Nábrók* twitched and tightened. Rik put the handkerchief in his mouth and desperately tried to suck the blood from it.

Nábrók twitched, tightened and pinched his member so hard he thought he would scream like a little girl.

Rik pulled up his dress pants and stepped out of the restroom, determined to hydrate Nabrok and figure out a way out of them without having to kill Saber, after dinner.

*

Saber sat down and mentally called to Gisli. *This is no fun for me you damned daylight vampire! I didn't sign up for this! I came here to...*

"To what? Make money? Drop the bomb on a great expanse of wilderness?"

Saber turned her head. Sitting next to her, was the blonde god. "How did you do that? Get from my veins to this bench?"

Gisli replied with a smile and sing-song tone, "Shifter."

Saber grunted. "I don't like this one bit. You tell me I'm in danger and then disappear. You live inside my veins like some kind of STD infection, yet make me mad with desire whenever I know you're around. And damn it, you've made me second-guess my whole life plan. I didn't come here to save the world, Gisli."

"No, you came here to save the western fjords from greedy developers. We'll take on the world next week," Gisli replied.

"So, who's out to get me? And why?" Saber asked.

"Saber!" It was Rik. "Come along, you must see the view from this side!"

Saber clenched her fists. *I am never going to figure out what's going on here!* Gisli had again vanished at Rik's approach. *Damn pixie!*

*

The security guard didn't know what to do. He'd never had trouble of this kind at the Pearl before. In fact, other than the occasional tourist shoplifting a trinket from the souvenir shop, his job was fairly uneventful. He placed his strong arm around the shaken woman. With a heavy German accent pervading her attempt to speak English to the guard, she described a horror he found hard to grasp. Had she been drinking? He sniffed her hair as she sobbed. No. There was no alcohol on her person. He cautiously peeked under her shawl. Sad brown eyes looked up at him, and a little tail wagged slightly—below what clearly looked like a human bite mark.

"I put his little leash around the pole and used the restroom ever so briefly. When I returned, he was gone. My little boy was gone."

A miniature dachshund. Her little boy. The guard rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "And then you found him behind the potted plant?"

"Yes. With the horrible wound on his back!" the woman sobbed.

The guard stroked the red-coated dog's smooth back. "He seems fine, but you had better take him to the animal hospital on Langholtsvegur."

"Someone bit my dog! He is not fine!"

"I have alerted the police, Mrs.—one will be here shortly. I must go examine the area where your dog was injured now. Will you be all right alone for a moment?" the guard asked.

The woman nodded and held her dog closer to her chest. There was a very miniscule ring of blood on the shawl above the dog's hind end. Who would bite a dog? He thought immediately that a small child had stumbled across the hound and teathed upon the friendly little beast—but the bite marks were too large for a child. It was an adult. A lunatic. A lunatic at the Pearl. Or perhaps one of the Hidden Folk—the Yule Lad, *Bjúgnakrækir*, the sausage pilfer, came six months early and thought the little wiener dog was food. The guard chuckled. That would be something, indeed.

*

Rik seemed to have a skip in his step that made Saber believe she was about to

experience more than just fine dining. As they ascended the staircase, he smiled and chuckled to himself, sometimes whispering in Icelandic.

“You’re a happy boy tonight. The restroom offer more than usual?”

Rik slipped his arm around Saber. He’d made a conscious decision to tell his father to piss off. He didn’t want to be a witch prince. He may have been born to it, but his heart was not cut out for such duties. That decision was now well accepted.

Nábrók lashed out and scratched at him like a scourge. Rik held onto the railing and coughed as the maitre d’ welcomed Rik with open arms. Rik regained composure and embraced the maitre d’. “Saber, this is the Captain of the Pearl. He is an old friend of the family.”

“Enchanted, Miss Saber,” the Captain replied, bowing slightly. “Please, let me show you to your table.”

Saber had been wined and dined a time or two. She’d once dated a Japanese businessman who jetted her to Tokyo for a weekend. And that rich Texas bank executive—well, he’d been fun, but so damned conservative! However, the Pearl and the man next to her took the cake. Never in her life had Saber entered a revolving restaurant overlooking one of the cleanest, most pollution-free capitals in the world. On a clear day, you really can see forever in Iceland.

“This is amazing,” Saber sighed, unable to take her eyes off the vista as her table boy pulled out her chair.

“Perlan is noted for its interior and exterior views,” the Captain replied. “Your server will be with you in a moment. May I offer you a traditional aperitif before dinner?”

Saber looked across the table at Rik with a glance that clearly said, it isn’t sheep’s blood, is it? Rik laughed. “Thank you. Yes.”

Blue glass goblets and silvery-gray linens graced the tabletop. Fresh lupines and roses were on each table and huge cut-glass chandeliers added to the ambiance as the summer sun struck them making little rainbows on the ceiling. “Is that the geothermal river down there?” Saber asked.

Rik leaned forward to get a better look. “Yes, it is. See the trees? Ten thousand saplings were planted. From Alaska. Hardy little trees used to harsh climates. The Perlan has magnificent grounds.”

A typically beautiful young woman with bright blue eyes and insanely white-blond hair approached the table. She was breathtaking. Robert Ripley had it right when he said he’d seen some of the most beautiful women in the world in Iceland during his travels.

“Gott kvöld,” she said politely, passing a menu to Saber, then Rik. “Tonight we have a very special menu. For starters we have seafood soup with vegetables and shellfish. Our second course is chicken liver mousse with bacon foam on focaccia biscotti. Choices of main course tonight are grilled breast of chicken with herb polenta and tarragon sauce, grilled John Dory with oyster mushrooms and bok choy, roast fillet of lamb with mustard, herbs and rosemary sauce, or tenderloin of beef bourginonne with butter fried asparagus and root vegetables. Sauce Béarnaise is served with all main courses.”

“John Dory?” Rik asked.

“It is a fish from Australia. We have it flown here in tanks so that it is very fresh,” the waitress replied.

Rik laughed. “This is Iceland! We’re on an island surrounded by fish and you fly it here from Australia? This is truly the most magnificent restaurant in the world.”

The waitress didn't reply. Saber chuckled to herself before ordering. Had she heard it all before? "Well," she began, "I've had enough of sheep for one night." She cast a sideways glance at Rik. "And the last thing I want to do is energize my brain by eating fish, so I'll have the beef."

"I'll have the same. Can I have my beef cooked very rare?" Rik asked.

"Of course, sir," the waitress replied.

She walked away, the large menus under her arm. Saber giggled. "She told us everything on the menu? Why's she toting those things around with her?"

"She's just doing her job. Something we all must do," Rik replied.

Saber wondered if that damned vampire pixie was listening. "Yeah. Only I'm rewriting my job description come tomorrow. I can't, in good conscious, continue earning six figures a year for a company that is going to destroy," she waved her arms at the horizon, "all of this."

"I wish you would reconsider," Rik replied, knowing he was only mouthing the words his father wanted him to say.

A police officer in his crisp blue uniform strolled by with the Captain. "I wonder what he's looking for," Saber remarked.

Rik turned in his seat so that no part of his face could be seen by the someone passing the table. "I wouldn't know."

Saber reached across the table and tapped Rik's arm. "Yes, you do. I can tell you're fibbing, Steinrikur Vidarsson. Tell me what's going on."

He turned to face Saber. "I am innocent."

"No you're freakin' not," Saber replied.

* * * *

Dinner proved to be a near religious experience. It was hard to make polite conversation as one was experiencing an orgasm of gastric proportions. Dessert nearly sent her over the edge of decorum. White chocolate Crème Brule. To die for. Worth dying for.

They'd conversed little during their meal. Save for the moans of foody ecstasy, there was little to say.

Saber leaned back in her chair, sipping her coffee and almost wishing for another serving of dessert. She looked out the floor to ceiling concave window. The geothermal stream called to her.

"I wanna go down there, Ricky," she said. "Let's go skinny dipping."

"In Iceland that is not such an event as it is elsewhere in the world. We are welcome to be naked as long as we are not touching anyone else's nakedness in public," Rik replied. He motioned for the Captain.

"Did you enjoy your meal?" the Captain asked.

"It was fabulous. Thank you," Saber replied.

"My compliments to you and your crew, sir." Rik passed a wad of Icelandic bank notes into the hand of the maitre d'. "We'll be leaving now."

"Thank you, Steinrikur. The staff will appreciate your generosity."

Rik extended his hand to Saber. "Come along then, the night is young and the plane will stand by until we are ready to leave Reykjavik."

"I have to work tomorrow. I can't stay out too late or I'll lose my edge and not be

able to tell the corporates where they can stick their drilling devices,” Saber replied.

“You must have truly been possessed by, what do you call it in America ... a tree-hugger, while on Grimsey. You are not the same, Saber.”

“You want that money-grubbing bitch back, huh?”

“I want the Saber who supported industry, yes. You must ask the spirit haunting you to step forward so that I can question his motives,” Rik replied. They took the elevator down.

“Can’t a girl have a change of heart?” Saber asked.

Rik pressed her against the glass wall of the lift, stroking her ribcage and hip with his strong right hand. “I like your heart how it was. Saber, I want to make love to you, again. I want to taste your orgasm.”

Saber giggled and allowed Rik to nuzzle her throat—an area she’d been shy about sharing since Gisli put the bite on her. “I already had dessert, Ricky.”

He licked the bite marks left by the Old One. He could smell the breath of antiquity on Saber. It made his stomach churn. “But I know you, you are wishing for more white chocolate. Just as strongly as I wish to devour more dark chocolate.”

“Well spoken, Rik. But we’re fogging up the elevator, baby. Tuck that monster of yours away until we get lost in that little forest of ten thousand trees, hmmm?”

Rik and Saber strolled hand-in-hand along the tidy white stone path leading from the Perlan, through the trees, to the natural hot water stream.

Rik’s lower extremities began to itch. He’d not taken enough blood to keep the necropants flexible and they were rebelling. He was sure he’d traumatized that poor dog for life.

It was wrong, the constraining necropants and his desire to bite house pets. However, he had to keep the breeches happy—for now. *Keeping them happy*, was apparently, a necessary evil. Rik felt repulsed by his own thoughts. *Diabolical* was not his style.

The necropants constricted. Painfully. He winced with each step as his penis became encased in a vice-like grip and tendrils of pain shot up his legs.

All right. All right. Rik pictured his thoughts traveling down his body to his legs where the necropants would hear and release him from the stranglehold. I shall do what I need to do. What has been commanded of me by my father. My way.

*

They were alone by the banks of the sulfuric stream. Steam rose from the water and its absolute clarity startled Saber. *So pure is Iceland. So very pure. I cannot spoil it. Enola Gay is not going to drop the bomb this time ‘round. No way. I’m done.*

Rik slid his arms around her from behind. He was hard. She could feel his potent erection pressing against her backside. “My, oh, my. We’re ready that quickly, are we?”

“You make me hard, Saber. Just looking at you. Your touch. Your scent.”

“Ricky, you are becoming a fine young man. Who’s been teaching you how to say sweet nothings, any way?” Saber teased. She turned in Rik’s arms and kissed him. “Let’s get naked, huh?”

Giggling like school children they stripped and waded into the steaming waters. Saber dropped to the riverbed and stretched out. Her bosom peeked out from the slow, shallow current. Rik waded to her side and reclined next to her.

“This is heaven,” she said softly. “Except for the smell.”

“Sulfur,” Rik replied.

“Rotten eggs. It’s stronger over where you are. Can you tell?” Saber asked.

“Saber,” Rik said softly.

“Yes?”

“This,” Rik said. He reached one hand between her legs as his mouth found hers. He caressed her clitoris from its sheath and inserted two smooth fingers into her. His tongue flicked against hers in rhythm to the movements of his fingers. Her hips responded. He could make her come this way, or he could climb atop her, pin her, fuck her, and drown her into unconsciousness.

He chose the former.

Nábrók chose the latter.

Saber responded to Rik as he rolled atop her. He placed one strong arm under her neck to hold her head above the flow as he entered her. Fast, furious. He thrust deep and hard, seemingly caring only about his own pleasure. Saber tried to shift her weight under him, to encourage him to slow and make each pass against her swollen clitoris count—but he wouldn’t have it. This act was for him. His pleasure. She’d been there before. She hated selfish men.

Rik didn’t slow his momentum one iota, but crushed harder against her, his right forearm under her neck and then his left hand over her throat in a chokehold.

Saber fought against him, striking at him with closed fists, bringing her knees up, twisting her body to get him off. He didn’t budge. He kept on pouring into her as she suffocated.

The sky went black.

She lost sensation in her arms and legs.

Her lungs were on fire and she could taste vomit in her mouth.

With one final lucid thought, she called his name. *His* name. The pixie that had been doing her from the inside, out. *Gisli!*

Her right hand moved down Rik’s hip, her fingers intertwining in the ties on the pants, now balking at staying hidden. She yanked and snapped the ties.

Rik yelped and released his death grip. He felt it like it was his own flesh. As if she’d reached into his gut and pulled.

Saber pulled again, this time completely unlacing the ties.

She raked her fingertips across the burn mark on Rik’s hip, drawing blood. His skin peeled away under her nails.

He rolled away, turning to examine the wound. She’d done some damage. The blistered flesh was open and weeping.

“What the hell are you wearing, Rik?” Saber asked.

Rik looked down. The necropants had seeped from his own flesh and looked very much like some monstrous theatrical prosthetic for a Pan or Satyr.

Saber coughed and rolled onto her knees, then pushed herself to her feet. “I know what those are. You’re wearing the necropants. You’re the fucking witch! You son of a bitch!” She lunged at Rik, striking him. “And you put that thing inside me? You let me put that thing in my mouth? What’s the matter with you?”

Rik tumbled backward as Saber came at him like a pit-fighter, fists flying and knees going for anyplace that would hurt.

She got one good solid blow in with a right hook. Dazed, Rik’s head hit the bank.

“You son of a bitch!” Saber spat. “Screwing me with a dead man’s dick. How could

you?”

She wasted no time in stripping Rik of the necropants. The gruesome drawers pulsed with a heartbeat of their own in her hands. “These are nasty!” She called out, “Gisli!”

Rik coughed blood. “Gisli?” He tried to lift his head, but was so stunned he could not.

Saber waded to the opposite shore and slipped on the necropants. “Now who’s wearing the pants in this family you fucking jerk?” She heaved upon the shore as the necropants adjusted to fit her sexy ass and long legs.

“Take them off, Saber.”

She turned. It was Gisli. Brighter than the midnight sun and twice as gorgeous. “I called you an hour ago! I’m over here fighting with a damned witch trying to bugger me with fucking dead pants and you take your flippin’ time getting here. I’m so tired of you screwing around inside my head it’s about damned time you showed up in the flesh! You are in the flesh, aren’t you?” she exclaimed.

“Take them off,” he said again.

“Not a chance, mister. If that piece of work can screw me wearing these nasty drawers, then I intend to do the same to him. I cold-cocked the bastard. Just watch me figure out how to get this thing hard and I’ll give him what-fucking-for!” She slapped the flaccid penis of *Nábrók*.

Gisli approached, a hand extended to Saber. “No.”

Saber stomped her foot like a three year old. “Why the fuck not?”

“Because you forgive him.”

“I do?” Saber asked. “I do? What do you mean I forgive him?”

“You will. We need him. Take off *Nábrók*, Saber. Give them to me.” Gisli slid upside Saber, allowing her to use his weight to hold herself steady as she pulled off the necropants.

“Against my better judgment,” she said handing off the necropants. “Now what?”

“We go to Myvasveit. There is an entrance to the realm of the Hidden Folk. They will take *Nábrók* and destroy them. With their destruction, and your persuasiveness on the morrow, Iceland will be safe,” Gisli replied.

“What about him?” Saber asked, nodding toward Rik.

“He, and his father, will pay for their bad deeds, in time. Rik is much more valuable to us alive and in full possession of his faculties. Therefore, please do not batter him about the head again. We need him intact—especially right now.”

“Why?” Saber asked.

“It’s his plane.”

Chapter Five

Gisli helped Rik into the Cessna and fastened the boy's seatbelt. Rik was both mortified at failing to do his father's bidding and for agreeing to do it in the first place. And for being beaten up by a girl. "I'm likely to be in a great deal of trouble when next I meet my father," he said. "You don't understand. I was born to serve his purpose. I am some sort of prince among the witches."

"Yeah, like that's more trouble than you'd be in if you'd managed to kill me," Saber replied. "My grandmother down in New Orleans taught me a thing or two about coming back from the dead, you..."

"I'm so sorry, Saber," Rik continued. "I was not going to kill you. I wanted you unconscious so that *Nábrók* might believe I'd killed you as my father had commanded of me. I would never have let you die, Saber. I was looking for a way to free myself of the breeches."

She slapped him across the face. "Oh, yeah, like that makes everything better!"

Gisli stayed her hand. "Saber, I know you are angry. You've been through a lot. But know this, you are changing the face of this nation, and when you leave, you will need good men to step up and follow in your footsteps. Ice-Eye has significant applications for predicting earthquakes and changes in ocean currents. Your program is going to revolutionize early warning systems all over the world. All you have to do is, in your fine, vocal manner, tell AlumaTrends what their new direction is. You are the backbone of the company, Saber. They will listen to you. They will be compelled to listen. Someday, Rik will work for you, not against you."

"No dam. No smelter. No jobs," Rik moaned. "Even before my father assigned me to run his terrible errands, I wanted the plant built."

"Steinrikur, you have a bright future helping to protect our wilderness areas. You can become a good friend to the Hidden Folk and be praised by the Old Ones for all time. Not many men have had this honor."

"My father is going to kill me," Rik replied.

"Your father is the pawn of another, more powerful witch, and when *Nábrók* are destroyed, that witch will lose much power of persuasion. No more children will be initiated into the coven of the western fjords and most certainly, no more young Icelanders will be branded when it is time for their service to the coven to commence. The witch hunts of Iceland's past are over—now, instead of burning their bodies, we will burn goodness back into their hearts."

"You don't live with my father," Rik replied.

Gisli shook his head. "Eventually you will convince him that his path is not one lined with dollars and aluminum ingots."

"You're going to have to do some convincing my way, too," Saber replied. She wandered toward the front of the cabin, muttering to herself. "Vampires! Shifters! Boy witches who wear dead pants. I didn't sign up for this! And damn it, I broke a nail kicking the shit out of Rik!"

*

It was a two-hour drive, way past midnight, with a trek through fly-ridden terrain to

reach the stone circle. "That's it," Rik said. "My father had me stand within the circle. A mist surrounded me and held me fast while he marked me. He called it Satan's Breath."

"It is nothing more than a steam vent in the grass. But, the Hidden Folk are strong here, and they ride up the steam to the surface," Gisli replied.

"Why can't we just burn the necropants?" Rik asked.

"Because they're magic," Saber added. "Even I know you have to fight fire with fire. And I don't even believe in this shit. I think I'm unconscious somewhere and this is all a freakin' bad dream." She paused. "To destroy magic, you've gotta use magic. Right, Gisli?"

"Right, Saber," Gisli replied.

"It's nice to have you out of my head for awhile, man. I thought I was losing it." She went off of a tangent, not really expecting Gisli to reply. "Witches who drink blood are draugur and draugur are enemies of the Old Ones, who are vampires," she began.

"And Shifters," Gisli interjected.

"And Shifters! And I'm just some fine looking bitch who happens to smell right or something and got invaded in so very many ways by warring factions." Saber swatted at the flies. "I hate bugs! Now, hurry up and leave those damned drawers in the circle or something so that we can get out of this bug-infested sulfur pit!"

Gisli took Saber's arm. "Magic doesn't have to be difficult. It is that simple. We leave the necropants, turn our backs, and walk away. Unlike the last time when we sealed them up in stone to be eaten away by time and tide, there is no escaping the underworld. They'll come to no evil purpose in the hands of the Hidden Folk."

"Unless a Yule Lad shows up in town wearing the pants next Christmas, that is," Rik replied.

"The Yule Lads wouldn't do such a thing." Gisli placed the necropants carefully inside the stone circle arranged on the grass by Vidar. "They have shoe fetishes, any way. They do not want pants. Only your shoes."

"I have not placed my shoes in the window to receive a gift from the Lads during Christmas since I was a little child. I did not believe in the Yule Lads," Rik said.

"Ah, but I'm sure they believe in you. Let's go. Do not look back and do not speak of this after tonight," Gisli replied.

Rik walked away from the circle, sobbing. "I bit a dog. I bit a little dog at Perlan. The necropants were growing unhappy and I bit a little dog."

"He's lost it," Saber commented.

"He will weep with remorse and from withdrawals from the power of *Nábrók*. But he will be fine."

"What about me? It's my head on the chopping block when I show up for work today," Saber replied.

Gisli slipped his arm in hers. "You will be fine, too."

"Am I going to have withdrawals from you?" she asked.

Gisli laughed. "I'm not going anywhere."

"What about Rik?" Saber asked.

Gisli smiled. "I'll share."

Epilogue

Six months later

Saber finished marking a paper with bright red ink and slipped her glasses onto her desk. A gentle knock at the door stopped her from nodding off. “Professor Evangelista?” a voice called from behind the rippled glass.

“Yes, come in, Hafdis,” Saber replied.

Hafdis Finnbogadottir, assistant to the Dean of Information Technology, stepped inside Saber’s office. “Your car is waiting. Are you ready to be the first American woman to address *Althingi*? You are about to take part in a political action dating back to the year nine hundred thirty.”

“It feels good, Hafdis. Very good. What we’re doing feels good. Signing a compact to protect Iceland’s wilderness is right. I’ve worked hard to get this on the table.”

“And the agreement with AlumaTrends to build a steam pipeline and turbine windmills is revolutionary. Americans helping Iceland—without having to bomb us first. I’m so very proud,” Hafdis replied.

“Is Rik in the car?” Saber asked.

“He is. He looks very handsome. He says his father is doing much better, too.”

“Kristness Mental Health Facility is remarkable. I’m glad Dr. Gunnarsson is recovering from those awful delusions he was having,” Saber replied. She straightened the nameplate on her desk before exiting her office. The Dean of Information Technology for the University of Iceland, at Reykjavik can’t have a messy desk now, can she?

“It is truly miraculous that Rik has taken his father’s illness so well. They were very close,” Hafdis added. “I’m sure your attention has helped him find his way, too.”

Saber smiled. She paid Rik attention, all right. Forgiveness was working for her. “Well, I’m off to make history.”

She touched the scar at the base of her throat as she walked out of her office. It pulsed with a life-force she’d grown accustomed to, and cherished. It was all good—all of it.

The threesomes weren’t bad, either.

The End

About the Author:

Darragha Foster is the author of the award-winning novel “Love's Second Sight” a passionate Viking-Age romance that took her to Iceland and the Isle of Tiree for some extremely hands-on research. Darragha's second book, “The Orca King” startled the likes of even Mrs. Giggles with its “shift into a whale” hero. She loves to feed the snarks and hopes to someday catch one and attach a ray gun to its head.

She looks at everything around her as an opportunity to create a plot-line, much to the chagrin of her friends and family. She's a noisy BBW on a mission to entertain, living

a life full of love and horse manure. Horse manure? Darragha and her family own a horse and while her daughter is mucking or training, Darragha sits in the car and writes on her Tungsten T-5 next to her snoozing thirteen year-old miniature dachshund. Cold, Hard Kash and the Teaching Old Gods New Tricks series were written in the car! Spell-Crafted for Pleasure in the Halloween anthology “A Witch in Time” was actually completed at a clothing-optional (gasp!) resort in the San Juan Islands—on that hand-held computer!

Darragha loves to tell stories, and though she sometimes writes stuff that has been referred to as “weird sh*t,” she continues to publish books that leave her readers begging for (her to stop, please) more.

She lives in the Pacific Northwest, has worn only clogs for 30+ years and drinks way too much coffee.

Dealing with the Dead

Tina Holland

Chapter One

3024 AD

Compound 51, Outside of Sin Vegas

Even Shakespeare never suffered the endless auditions of an apparition! Melissa of the Air Clan woke to the sound of the ghostly Charles reciting the ancient playwright yet again. He'd once been a great actor of the Elizabethan stage until he'd been killed by a vampire. She often thought it odd vamps existed long before the evils of the modern world.

"Charles enough!" Melissa sat up, covering her ears.

"Sorry Melissa, but one never knows when one will have the opportunity to perform in front of an audience." Melissa doubted there was a great call for Shakespearean apparitions but kept her opinion to herself.

"Do you know where Doc is?"

"Dr. Roberts is in SE VERS going over last night's scans."

"Good, at least one of us is working." Melissa shivered at the touch of the cold cement on her feet as she strolled briskly to the closet in search of clothes. She didn't bother to hide her nakedness.

"Miss Melissa! You need to be more modest. Such brazen disregard for your person is dangerous." Dear Charles, sometimes he was trapped in his own time.

"Charles, are you speaking of my sexuality or my vulnerability to things which prey on humans?"

"Both." He raised his hands in exasperation, "There is simply no reasoning with you, when you are like this. Women should compose themselves in a manner befitting their station..."

Melissa ignored him as he went into a tirade on her atrocious upbringing. It wasn't her fault she was born in an age when being a woman wasn't desirable. Being the weaker sex works against you when coexisting with vamps, shifters and zombies. But she had something most humans didn't have. Ghosts! Yes they were indeed key to survival in modern day. Some clans relied on magic and some on science. Melissa's clan embraced both. She was considered fortunate to have been born a Passage—those who speak with the dead and were possessed by them. She finished dressing in her usual attire of fitted black pants, her pearl tunic top molded against her body like a second skin. Knee-high leather steel-toed boots completed her attire. She tied her strawberry blonde hair back so it wouldn't be in her face and proceeded down the corridor to SE VERS.

The cold, gray compound had been abandoned by everyone except a small group of scientists around five hundred years ago following the fourth world war. The war that created the abominations she now hunted. A bio-virus was dropped on the Americas by

Antarctica as a test before Desert Europe was hit. In retaliation the Desert Europeans launched missiles left from The Cold War. Missiles supposedly disposed of. The radiation in combination with the bio-virus created zombies. A zombie's muscle breakdown gave them a short life but the increased metabolic rate created constant hunger. The monsters continually ate to survive, and they weren't terribly picky. Zombies were virtually unstoppable until they starved to death. Being bitten by one practically guaranteed you contracted the radioactive bio-virus.

Melissa used her pass to activate the lock on the door and, as usual she found Dr. Gideon Roberts with his head in the monitor scanning the recordings of the SHOP. The SHOP sent out data on the latest sightings, including people. The SHOP used the old cameras sighted all over Sin Vegas, and perpetually downloaded data. No one actually managed the data anymore it was simply erased and recorded over. The downside was unless you were a computer, vamp, or ghost, it was nearly impossible to go through all the data before it was deleted and recycled again. Lucky for her, Doc was a ghost. "Any luck?"

"Actually yes. Michael was at Le Cage."

Melissa gloried briefly in relief. "He's alive, thank the elements."

"But it's not good, Mel."

"What is it?"

"You'll need to see the tape."

Mel sat back and rested her gaze over the monitor, readying herself for the worst. Le Cage was basically a meat market. It was where vamps and shifters went to buy people for their own devices, whether it was sex, slavery or food. She watched the monitor and saw Michael in the audience. He was alive. Thank the elements he was alive. A woman proceeded across the stage. She seemed confident, naively so, most likely promised a lot of money to perform this striptease. Le Cage owners, fucking vamps, were notorious for granting money up front, they always got it back in the end as individuals were likely unable to collect. Most locals knew Le Cage for what it was, but heavens help the traveling performers. The naive girl continued to prance up and down the caged runway until the bars started to roll up.

Melissa stayed focused on Michael, as the bars went up. He seemed to double over in pain. When he finally rose, she was assaulted with relief and shock. Michael was turning. He'd been bitten by a shifter sometime during the seventy-two hours in which he'd been missing. Judging by his new features it appeared to be canine. Thanks to genetic manipulation there were also werecats and other types of shifters. Canines were harder to kill, good news for Michael. Bad news for anyone he harmed. She continued to watch the tape, thankful Michael was alive and concerned he was being hunted. As if suddenly realizing her precarious situation the young lady on the monitor now lacked the confidence to perform. The monitor went blank.

"What happened?" Mel asked, hitting the monitor, her hand bouncing off and going through Doc's caporal form.

"The SHOP is recycling." Doc answered.

"No matter, we're going to Le Cage tonight."

"Are you crazy? That's suicide. We don't even know why Michael was there."

"But we are going to find out. I'll go get Charles. He can be the chiller tonight, so you need to monitor vitals."

*

Drake leaned up against the side of Le Cage. It was miserable tonight. Not a decent meal left, he detested draining humans, but it was hard to say where his next meal would come from. He'd purchased a lovely blonde last night. He'd been gentle with her. Drake made love to her first. You never knew where your next good lay would be either. She'd cum three times and during her last orgasm, Drake had every intention of draining her dry when he was interrupted by The Coyotes. They claimed her as one of their marked. She was tattooed but Drake figured the girl was sold. Unwilling to take on an entire pack, Drake let the Coyotes have her. He could not forget the fear laced in her eyes. He whispered to her, "You are safe." The lie felt bitter on his tongue, but it was better she not know what was in store for her.

He watched all the patrons come and go from the shadows. He lifted his head. He caught a whiff of blood approaching. It was a heartbeat, steady and pounding. The beat slowed down. Normally the beats sped up, a human's heart knew it was in danger and might never beat again. He retreated further into darkness. She came into his field of vision at the end of the street. God, what a shame he'd have to drain her. She was lovely with porcelain skin and bright blue eyes, scanning everything and everyone as if she owned the world. His eyes impaled her. The sound of a heartbeat was faint. She was cold like a vampire. He sniffed the air, unable to smell her blood.

She hurried, not stopping, past vamps, shifters, and even a couple zombies. They all ignored her. What was she? It was rare all three ignored potential prey. Especially the zombies, they ate anything, even each other. Gods he hated zombies! Zombies ate vampires when they were most vulnerable, during the day while they slept.

She reached the back door and looked directly at him, as if she could see through the darkness.

"Drake!" She spoke with venom.

Immediately her body flooded with heat. Confusion fluttered over her face as she turned stepped backwards closer to the entrance. It was too late! The werewolves were the first to smell a meal and started towards her. Drake prepared to grab her and scale the wall for the first taste. He could drain her and leave the corpse for whatever may want it.

Chapter Two

Melissa stared at the lycans rushing towards her and sensed the threatening vamp nearby. “Doc? Help.” She whispered.

Doc possessed her body. Possession was strange because while you were no longer in control, the spirit was, events were witnessed and experienced.

“God Dammit, Charles. You’ve got no right to act impulsively.” Her voice but laced with Doc’s inflections. Doc spoke into the shadows. She saw Charles, blocking the tall, dark-haired vampire from coming forward. The bloodsucker struggled for composure.

Doc turned and she saw the shifters were fairly close, but they no longer picked up her scent. They sniffed the air but seemed lost on the trail. Possession made you cold, your heart slowed down, and you quit sweating—virtually invisible to predators.

“Charles. Come on.”

Charles passed through the wall and the vamp strode forward. Pity he was a bloodsucker. With that gorgeous ebony hair and golden brown eyes, Melissa was tempted to do some sucking for a change. He spoke. “Hello.”

He was trying to mesmerize her. She’d seen the look before. Unfortunately it didn’t work on the possessed. If Doc hadn’t been in control she might have taken him up on the offer. Suddenly the door opened. Doc caught the door and got them safely inside, never acknowledging the vamp. Once inside, he un-possessed her.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Doc yelled at Charles.

“Do you know who that was?” Charles spoke from the possessed doorman

“I don’t care! You had no right jeopardizing Mel like that!”

“Miss Melissa I’m so sorry.” Charles said sincerely.

“Charles please exit the doorman. We’ll talk about this later.” Mel sauntered down the dank, empty corridor, towards the only light sneaking under the crack of the door. She hoped it was the office as she rapped on the nearly unbreakable wood.

“Come in!”

The overwhelming blend of smoke, sex, and blood hit her upon entering the room. She coughed. A bald, overweight, cigar-smoking man behind the desk never glanced up from the piles of paper littering his counter. He wasn’t a vamp that much she could tell.

“I want to speak with the owner.”

“Owner’s not here. I manage Le Cage. What can I do for you?” He still didn’t make eye contact.

“I understand you need fresh talent.”

He looked up. His soulless eyes glazed over her figure. Melissa knew she was probably the only person to walk in here uncoerced. “Yeah, I am. So you wanna be on the stage?” His eyes assessed her like a hungry man who couldn’t remember his last meal.

“I’m looking to make some extra cash.” She said in a cool tone.

“First performance pays one thousand dead prez.”

“I want five thousand.”

“No can do.”

“Neither can I.” She turned on her heel.

“Wait!”

Melissa perceived desperation in his voice. She paused and turned back, crooking her head at him and smiling sensually at him.

"I'm not gonna pay five thousand for one performance."

"Who said anything about one performance? I want three shows a week."

"Three shows?!" He laughed without restraint, "Sweetheart I've never had anyone do three shows."

"You must be *starved* for dancers then." Mel didn't bother to hide the innuendo.

"I'll tell you what. I'll pay you one thousand before the first show and four thousand after." *Sly dog*. He thought she'd be dead after the first show.

"Deal. But I want six thousand a week then."

"Done."

"See you tomorrow?" Melissa was ready to leave.

"Sweetheart, the first show starts in thirty minutes. I expect you to be on stage." He put one thousand dead prez on the table.

"No problem."

Once out of the office, Melissa turned to her partners, "Okay guys, I need some help."

"At last! My chance to perform. Melissa you will be an angel reciting her majesty's English." Charles clasped his hand to his chest, getting ready for the performance of his death-time.

"Charles. It's not that kind of performance. Doc?"

"Let's check backstage, you might get lucky. There might be some spirits mulling about."

"Good Idea." They continued down the hall walking towards the stage area. Sure enough there were plenty of ghosts to choose from. Unfortunately she needed the right presence. Melissa found her in front of a mirror. Primping herself. It was odd but many ghosts still maintained their human habits. "Doc, how about her?"

"Are you sure Mel?"

"Yep. I have a feeling."

She stepped towards the apparition. "Excuse me?"

The ghostly girl paid no attention.

"Hey Red,"

No response.

Melissa reached out her hand and touched her.

The spirit gazed at Melissa's reflection in the mirror. "You talking to me?"

"Yes."

"You can see me?"

"Yes."

The phantom turned around. "How is this possible?"

"I'm a Passage."

"Never heard of 'em. Like a witch?"

"Sort of."

"Who's your friend?" The apparition gazed at Doc in a predatory manner.

"That's Doc."

"Doc, huh? Want to play doctor?" Girly ghost batted her phantom eyes at poor Doc.

"Can this wait? Maybe you two can play back at the compound," Melissa was

starting to lose what little control she had. "Look Red, I need your help."

"My name is not Red." She turned back towards the mirror.

"What is it?"

"Camilla Stevens."

"Camilla, can you help me?"

"My friends call me Cammy." She gawked at Doc, insinuating she welcomed his friendship.

Melissa turned to Doc and lipped, "fix this!"

Doc came forward. "Miss Stevens?"

"Yes, Doctor? I'm sorry I didn't catch your name." Camilla turned to look at Doc.

"Doctor Gideon Roberts."

"Gideon?"

"Yes."

"You can call me Cammy."

"Cammy, can you help us?"

"Maybe. What did you need?"

"We were hoping you were a performer."

"I used to be an exotic dancer. I excel at the tease, Dr. Roberts." Camilla jiggled her breasts drawing Doc's attention downward.

"I'm sure you do." He coughed trying to maintain composure. If time wasn't of the essence, she would enjoy this little show.

"Did you want a lap dance?"

"No."

Camilla stepped directly in front of and whispered into Doc's ear, "What did you want?" Unaware Melissa heard everything.

"I want you to possess me." Melissa interrupted, "You know me? Standing over here." Melissa tapped her toe on the floor revealing her impatience.

Camilla turned and tilted her head. "Sweetie, is this some new trend? I'm all about taking it to the next level, but you must have your wires crossed if you think there can be anything between us."

"Perhaps it would be better to show you. Charles?"

Charles stepped in to align his body with hers. "There you see, Miss Camilla, there is nothing to it."

Camilla stepped forward, "How did you ... " her voice trailed off in amazement.

"It is quite simple. You align yourself with Miss Melissa, our hostess, and voila!"

Charles gestured his hands along her body as if it was a magical trick.

"Hostess? So only certain people can do this?"

"Yes and No. Miss Melissa allows us to possess her."

"Why?"

"It is to her benefit, it gives her the ability to survive."

"What do you get?"

Doc spoke up, "We are allowed to have contact with the living, and perhaps right enough wrongs to pass on to the afterlife."

"Like I said, what do you get out of it?" She asked Doc.

"If you are only motivated by your selfishness, nothing. Mel, I think we should find someone else."

“Hey now! I didn’t say no, I was simply curious. No reason to be all stuffy.”

“Will you help us Miss Camilla?” Charles pleaded.

“Sure. What do you need?”

*

Drake’s dark earnest eyes darted around the multiple figures filling the club. The smoke filled haze didn’t deter him. He needed to find his angel from the street. She looked like one too, with reddish-blond hair tied back and the curls escaping to frame her face. Her fair skin accentuated her sapphire eyes. The lights were starting to go down. Zombie death match scheduled tonight. It was a full house.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a special treat for you. Le Cage is proud to present The Ice Princess,” the announcer continued. “The usual bids will be in effect.”

A spotlight hit the stage and there she stood. His seraphim. What was she doing here? His angel was going to get herself killed. She proceeded out and he noticed she wasn’t radiating any heat, the wolves were calm. Her pulse was faint, like she was on death’s bed. She wore an ice blue gown, the dress reminding him of the nineteen fifties, and it had a trail of sequins in a ‘V’, accentuating her feminine form.

He missed the twentieth century; so many diseases, easy to cover kills, or simply drain the sick. Vampires were immune to most diseases, hell they even created a few to cover up the killing. After the age of zombies, most vampires, including him, didn’t touch the sick. No longer were there guarantees you wouldn’t get sick draining prey.

Drake continued to watch mesmerized by her performance. She was good. The Ice Princess slid the gown straps down by shimmying her shoulders. It helped the dress was too big in the chest. The pale periwinkle fabric slid to her waist exposing her navel, reaching down to her heel she took the side slit and ripped the dress from her alabaster flesh. She paraded around in a thong hiding her breasts with her matching satin-gloved hands. She shook her hips to the rhythm of the song, allowing the beat to conduct her movements. Slow and sensual she grasped a bar in her left hand as she slipped the thong off, revealing a thatch of red hair.

“Show us the guts!” A shout from the audience pierced the hushed awe. As much as Drake wanted to see her revealed, he had no desire to share.

The ice-princess lowered her delectable body onto the stage. She lay on her back, exposing her breasts. She took each of her mouth-watering plump pink nipples into her gloved fingers and rolled them until they were protruding. She lifted off the floor surface and up thrusting her breasts out of the bars. Her action allowed a shifter and vamp to each suckle her erect spikes. She moaned the sound reverberating in his ears.

Drake’s cock hardened. He watched as a few patrons lifted their own erections out of their clothing, stroking their organs as they watched the show. His angel reached her hands through the bars grasping the two men to her. When they trailed their tongues down her body she lowered herself unto her back again. The long tongue of the shifter grazed the apex of her heat. A lustful groan erupted from Drake’s own throat. The longer she continued, the hotter her pussy and tits became. Drake felt an urge to release his own hard-on, but he had every intention of enjoying a fuck with this little pretty all alone. No audience. Drake rubbed his shaft through his pants as he imagined plunging into the heat of her. The shifters were pretty worked up too, some starting to change and howl. They no doubt picked up her sexual scent.

She lay back on the stage to allow the lycan full access to her glistening cunt. He

lashed his tongue up and down her pussy. Her moans timed with those in the audience. She arched further up lifting her hips off the stage. A vampire quickly slid a finger into her, fucking her hole while she writhed. A few audience members erupted in orgasm. Semen hit the stage glossing it over. A few splatters hit the performer. As if it was what she desired, she convulsed in an orgasm that reverberated through her. Suddenly she flushed with full-on heat. There was no hiding that she was a flesh and blood human. The poor girl couldn't scramble up fast enough, slippery cum made it difficult to stand, especially in the heels she was wearing. Drake heard her erratic heartbeat; his angel was panicked. He looked at the audience. Most were still coming down from the erotic high and hadn't noticed her transformation.

The bars were starting to come up. As if she knew the danger, she slowed her movements until she was cool again. She'd been aptly named. The air no longer held her perfume. Other patrons seemed mystified as well. By the time the bars were receded, he wanted to grab her and take her around back, bite and keep her as his blood slave. If they auctioned her tonight, he would buy her, no matter what the cost.

As if she sensed his need, she turned and swaying her hips provocatively, danced towards him.

She leaned down and whispered "Drake baby, it's been so long."

"Do I know you?" He asked taken aback.

She merely leaned back and swiveled her hips at him, the gesture seemed so familiar. She turned on her heel and strode back towards the curtain. Before she ducked behind, she revealed a knowing smile and blew him a kiss. *Cammy!!*

*

"What the hell was that!?" Melissa asked Camilla once they were back stage again.

"That was Drake. Isn't he to die for?"

"I'd rather not. I like my blood where it is, thanks."

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Miss Camilla, did you say Drake?" Charles asked.

"Yeah." Camilla answered.

"Drake Vermillion?"

"Do you know him, Charles?" Mel asked.

"He is the vampire who murdered me, the very same one we met before we arrived here tonight. How do you know of him, Miss Camilla?"

"Drake killed me too, what about you, Doc?" She sauntered over to him, swaying all the way.

"I wasn't drained by a vamp. I was hit by a bus in Las Vegas."

"What year?"

"Two thousand seven."

"I was drained in nineteen seventy-five!" Camilla exclaimed.

"Okay kids, this whole 'how I died' reunion is fascinating, it is, but we've got work to do." Melissa broke in.

"I'll take possession this time Mel." Doc responded.

"Okay let's go."

Chapter Three

Drake watched Cammy leave. It wasn't Cammy. He watched her walk down the street. She floated with ease and grace, oblivious to danger. She jogged as she turned the corner and headed to the edge of the boulevard. There she jumped on to an antiquated motorcycle. He wondered where she found the fuel. Most fossil fuels were non-existent, these days. You had to know some powerful and elite people to get them.

He wondered if maybe she was a reincarnate. The Fire Clan believed in rebirth and renewal. They were also the most notorious of the Hunting Clans. Drake was in big trouble if they were rebirthing vampire hunters. He killed two of the Fire Clan's best slayers, in self-defense, but the clan wouldn't care.

It was like them to reincarnate an old flame like Cammy. She was wonderful, some of the best sex he'd ever had with a human and the longest he'd ever stayed with anyone. Most vampires like himself were promiscuous, intense relationships were usually with other immortals, not humans.

He watched her arrive at a compound in Area 51. The perimeter fences would keep out zombies and maybe some werewolves, but vampires jump over, which he planned on doing after she sealed herself in the walls.

About four hours passed and he was inside the perimeter. He made his way to a locked door with a key card locking mechanism. There was a panel off to the left, for an access code. It was so subtle the human eye wouldn't catch it. The numbers 5-6-3-7 were worn down significantly. He investigated the wiring from the panel wondering how many times he could work a series of numbers before an alarm would sound. He noticed immediately the panel was disconnected. Damn!

He'd try the roof. He scaled the concrete walls. Once on the roof he searched for an opening. No, Drake thought this definitely would not keep out vampires. He did have to admit the concrete walls provided some insulation from an immortal's natural search for prey. He was having a difficult time reading life forms inside.

Drake dashed through the stairwell. He found it hard to believe there was anyone here. He couldn't smell or hear anything but his own footsteps. The stairwell was completely sterile. The ultraviolet lights suddenly switched on didn't help his vision, forcing him to put on sunglasses and pull his trench coat over his face to avoid burning. When he reached the bottom of the stairs he welcomed the door, throwing it open in haste. He tripped an alarm system now, a siren blared in his ears.

Luckily the hall he entered was dark but it was hotter than hell, "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

The door at the end was within reach. It was wooden, not metal like every other door in this abandoned science lab. Drake headed for it, knowing if the cameras mounted on the walls near the ceiling were heat sensitive he was caught. He hoped for no more surprises on the other side.

When Drake reached the door, he turned the knob to find it locked. He pushed on it. No give. He knocked it, Red Oak—*Where on earth does this girl get her shit?* Red Oaks were extinct since before the Third World War. Before he reassessed his options, the door slid open and he fell into a well-lit room. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust; relief flooded through his icy veins. The lights weren't ultra violet. Drake was in an area

resembling an apartment. There was a galley kitchen and three rooms with closed doors. Each had a card reader on them. Damn! He stalked silently through when something caught his attention, his prey lay sleeping on a sofa in the living area, in nothing but a tank t-shirt and panties. Drake stepped towards her. He carefully scanned the room. He wasn't detecting any traps.

*

Melissa opened her eyes to see Drake Vermillion staring intently at her. "Get away from me!" She said pushing her hands against his unforgiving chest.

"Who are you now?" He asked cocking his head to the side.

"No one. Now get the hell off me! I'm not your next meal!" She pushed against his chest.

"You could be if you hold still." He stated flatly.

Melissa kicked. She was not going to be done in by a vamp. Anything but a vamp. Drake grabbed her arms and leaned in. Her heart raced! "Don't turn me."

"You'd rather die?" He pulled back to look her directly into her cobalt eyes.

"No. But if I have to choose..." Melissa's voice trailed off. He was dipping his head. She waited for his fangs to pierce her skin. Sweat formed on her skin, she was sure he smelled it. Melissa knew a vampire smelled fear.

"It's nice you are excited. It makes this easier." He whispered into her ear.

"I'm not excited." She maintained.

"Oh yes you are."

"I'm not ..." Melissa never finished the words. It was too late. Her lips were caught in Drake's own. He was kissing her. Kissing! Why was he kissing her? He pressed down into her heating flesh. His hand traced along her hip. Melissa felt herself grown damp between her thighs. How could she be attracted to him? She didn't want him to stop, because he would kill her. That was the answer. Yet her hands found their way around the back of his neck. Melissa lightly fingered through his coal hair. His skin was cool to the touch. She found it refreshing to the contrast of her own heated skin. She opened beneath him to allow him access to whatever he desired.

He slid the panties down around her legs. Melissa spread her legs wider allowing him access to her wanton flesh.

"Do you know what I'm going to do to you?"

"No." She panted.

"I'm going to fuck that damp pussy of yours."

She shivered at his coarse words. Melissa could think of nothing more appropriate. She craved it as well, wanting to prove it, she taunted him, "How are you going to fuck me?"

He ran his fingers over her exposed flesh and as he entered her heat with a single digit, she lifted her hips off the bed, "Maybe like this," He pulled his finger out and circled her anus with it, she felt it pucker, wanting to be filled, "or maybe here."

"Whatever." She breathed the word as calmly as possible, making an effort to sound nonchalant; unfortunately he probably realized he could have her "whatever" way he wanted.

"I think you are right," Drake leaned back down and kissed her deeply. He forced her lips open with his thrusting tongue and plunged into her mouth taking possession. Her composure was crushed with the hunger of his kiss. Melissa returned Drake's kiss with

reckless abandon. He pulled abruptly away from her and gazed into her eyes. "Sit up!" He commanded.

Melissa complied. Her attraction overwhelmed her logic.

Drake lifted her tank over her head and leaned down grasping a nipple in his mouth. His tongue darted over the puckered nipple and she arched into his wet caress. "You like that don't you?"

"Yes." She didn't deny it.

"Me, too." He lathered his tongue over her breasts, while his hands searched the folds of her pussy, parting her and tickling along the sensitive skin. He leaned back staring into her eyes.

Oh damn! Melissa was going to cum and soon. She felt his finger penetrated her and he ran the pad of his thumb over her throbbing clit, just enough to keep her aroused. She looked down.

"No look at me! Into my eyes," she looked up, "that's right. Now precious, what do you want?"

"To cum."

"Of course you do." He plunged another finger into her, "how many fingers do you want darling?"

"Whatever." She wouldn't let him see the control he had over the situation.

"How many?" He ground out.

"Whatever will fit?"

He plunged another finger and continued to massage her bud with his thumb. She began to meet his hand in small thrusts. She was close, so close. Just a little...

He stopped moving, "On all fours!" He stood up and undid his pants, thrusting his engorged cock into her face, "Do you want this?"

She could only nod.

"Worship it." His control sounded like a plea.

Melissa grasped his erect organ in her hand, stroking the velvet skin with light fingers. She heard Drake's sharp intake of breath when she lowered her mouth to his tool. She wrapped her lips around his cock, sucking slightly on the crown. Melissa ran her tongue along the underside and cupped his balls in her hand.

Drake clutched at her hair. She let him. Melissa felt herself grow damp and moaned in slight torture. He ran his hand along her back, grasping her hips and pulling them slightly toward him. Drake outlined her buttocks with his fingers. He reached down and placed his fingers in her slippery sheath. She moaned in relief around his shaft. Melissa feathered her fingers along his balls as he pumped digits in and out of her damp center. He continued his ministrations even as she felt him swell in her mouth. She felt her pussy tighten.

"Go ahead baby. I'm not afraid of getting wet." His voice soothed the last of her inhibitions as she came in waves over his fingers. The driving of his fingers sent a satisfying shock coursing through her. Following her own tremors of ecstasy, Melissa felt warm liquid hit the back of her throat and swallowed without thought. Drake threw back his head in a guttural cry and clasped her shoulders. He finished shallow dives into her mouth until she licked him clean. Drake lifted a lock of her hair and stroked it lightly. Melissa tried bringing him down closer to her but he pulled back as if she'd burned him. She wanted Drake to touch her, but felt the moment may be lost.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” Melissa spoke with muted resentment
“Me. It was me,” Drake zipped his pants as if nothing had happened, “I came in you.” He assured her, as if she hadn’t been present. He flicked his finger over her still hardened nipple.

“Well, yes, but I’m not usually so...”

“Uninhibited?” Drake rolled the traitorous bud between his fingers.

“Um yes,” she tried to focus on his words.

“Then it’s definitely me.” He looked smugly satisfied.

Melissa collected herself immediately. “I think I told you to get away from me!” She pushed him with enough force to unbalance him and allow her to slip out from under him, “I don’t have time to play with you. I’ve got work to do.”

Melissa wrestled to get into her clothes. They clung to her glistened skin making every movement difficult. She was aware of Drake watching her and it affected her to the core. Damn him! Once she was dressed she shifted towards one of the doors. Swiping her hip in front. The door beeped and slid open.

* * * *

Drake couldn’t see where the card was, her pants were skintight leather that clung to her tight form. God she was a tasty thing. There was no card in them he could see. Behind the door was an arsenal of weapons. “What do you hunt exactly?” He asked pulling his pants back up.

“Things that go bump in the night.” She pulled out a crossbow and pointed it at his bare chest.

Drake was caught off guard by the spitfire pointing the crossbow. It looked sharp and painful, “You do realize the arrow won’t kill me.” He hoped she wouldn’t shoot. Getting shot was painful ... even if it didn’t kill you.

“True, but I imagine you would find it as uncomfortable as I find your line of questioning. Who I am and what I do is none of your business.”

“You have a point.” He smiled at the double meaning.

“I’d keep it in mind before you speak, Mr. Vermillion.” She realigned her crossbow, so it was aimed at his head instead of his heart.

In spite of his earlier conquest, Drake was not improving his circumstances. “Fine. May I leave?”

“Certainly, you have what you likely came for, but the sun came up a half-hour ago.” She lowered her weapon and shrugged her shoulders, “Besides, I have work to do.”

Melissa turned back to the cabinet and collected items off the shelves, more arrows, a gun, two red vials, along with bandages and miscellaneous first aid items into a black bag on the marble table in front of her.

“What kind of work?” Drake closed in on Melissa when she turned her back.

“You ask too many questions.” She raised her arm never taking her eyes off her task.

“How did you do that?” Drake’s curiosity overwhelmed his good sense and he continued towards her.

She finally met his gaze, “I may not see you, Mr. Vermillion, but others in this room do.”

“These ghosts you speak of?”

“Yes.”

“How do you?”

“I’m a medium, Mr. Vermillion.”

“Call me Drake.”

“I don’t think so. We have no reason to be familiar with each other.”

“No reason. You just gave me the best head ever and practically came buckets over me.”

Melissa paused, “Nonetheless, there is no reason for you to stay.”

“You’ve got my attention captured, at least until the sun goes down.”

“The sunrise is exactly why I must leave now,” Melissa spoke hastily, “I don’t have time for chit-chat.”

“Where are you going?”

“To find another monster,” when she raised her eyes towards him, her face looked hopeless. She proceeded to cross the room and went down the hall. He followed her since she turned off the lights.

“Will your ghosts be going with you?”

“Yes. Zombies are still active during the day.” She spoke pointedly.

“Is there anything I can do?” Drake was drawn to her and wanted to help.

“Yes. You can be gone when I return.” His ego was bruised. He wished he could meet her demands but he had no intention of leaving. One orgasm with Melissa was not going to be enough, not until he truly felt satiated. Then he would leave, maybe.

Chapter Four

Melissa raced down the highway on her motorcycle. Precious time was wasted talking to a vampire. She needed to find Michael, not entertain herself with one of the most striking men she'd ever met. Melissa admitted finding herself attracted to Drake. It was a minor annoyance with potential to be a major distraction. The situation was best avoided. Eventually she would have to kill Mr. Vermillion. He wasn't wrong when he identified her as a hunter.

Michael and Melissa were only a few left of Fifty-one Air Clan. And currently the only ones left to eliminate the abominations remaining on the earth. How to deal with her brother turned canine shifter she didn't yet know. Melissa didn't like the idea of disposing of her own brother. She would trap him and bring him back to the compound. Perhaps the two siblings could figure some way out of their latest predicament.

Melissa slowed as she neared Sin Vegas, "Doc?"

"Right here, Mel."

"Are you ready to drive?"

"Of course." Doc responded enthusiastically.

Melissa lucked out the day Dr. Gideon Roberts found her. He was a gifted surgeon and possessed a passion for motorcycles, airplanes and sailing. She was fortunate her spirits each had natural talents, but she hit the jackpot the day Doc came to the compound. That was twenty years ago and he was the first ghost she ever engaged with, "Okay, take over."

*

Doc drove the rest of the way into Sin Vegas without incident. Zombies glanced at the sound of the engine but dismissed the machine. They reached Casablanca when Doc looked at the tracking device and noticed Mike was on the move. He was able to drive to the tower so Melissa could head Michael off before he left the city.

"Mel, I think we can disjoin," Doc didn't want her to be drained by the time they got Michael back home.

"*I think so, too.*" She answered him.

Doc left her body as he dismounted the bike. He watched as she navigated on foot through the abandoned hotel. As they traveled up the elevator he remembered Casablanca use to be a hopping place back in the day. It was so long ago.

When they reached the top floor Doc scanned the area for any sign of movement. He went on ahead, going through walls and doors, checking for zombies or sleeping vampires. None were found. They reached the end of a long corridor, "Mel!" Doc screamed for her to stop.

Melissa stilled, waiting for him.

Doc went through the door. He noticed humans in various states of dress. It reminded him of junkies from his living days. No doubt smelling of blood, sweat and sex. He floated back and faced Melissa, "It's a pack."

"Can you tell which one?" she asked

"Looks to be the Vegas Coyotes,"

"Damn."

“Are we back together then?”

“Yeah, they are notorious for eating flesh. I’d like some advantage.”

After Doc entered Melissa, he opened the door. The coyotes took only slight notice. There was an orgy in one corner of the room. Most of the pack seemed focused on the sexual fornication. He followed a small path lacking clothes and debris to a bedroom. He opened the door to find Michael copulating doggie-style with a blonde bitch. There was another mongrel at the edge of the bed getting ready to join them. The coyote had his hand on Michael’s shoulder as he bit into it, Michael arched back against the sensation. The coyote was rimming Michael’s ass with a well-lubed digit. It was apparent that Michael was going to be mounted. Doc thanked the stars he was in control and Melissa didn’t need to deal with this.

The coyote turned baring a set of fangs. His finger continued to penetrate Michael. Mike moaned, a feral sound, unaware an intruder entered the room.

Doc closed the door and softly locked it. He stepped forward, grabbing the nude man by the neck and flinging him against a door on the back wall, knocking him unconscious.

Michael turned around, “Oh, shit,” He scrambled across the bed away from the girl. Doc noticed his torso covered in scratches as Mike tried to cover his nakedness. His green eyes were bloodshot and his brown hair tousled as if he hadn’t bathed in days. “I can explain,”

“We know, my boy,” Doc spoke softly resting Melissa’s hand on his shoulder. Doc heard a sound from the bed. He turned. The woman started to rise and Doc shot her with the tranquilizer gun. He rotated back to Mike, “You are in a world of trouble.” He glared around to emphasize his point, “You know that?”

“Mel?”

“She’s too upset to talk right now. Let’s find you something to wear,” Doc walked over to a large mahogany bureau and tossed a pair of blue jeans and a gray hooded sweatshirt over to Michael.

“Doc, I didn’t ...” Michael pulled the jeans on and the sweatshirt.

“Shhhh. We’ll talk about it when you get home. Let’s get out of here.”

“I don’t think they will let me leave.” Mike pulled on a pair of boots from under the bed.

“Oh, yes they will.” Doc pulled a flash bomb out of his pocket. He opened the bedroom door and threw the bomb out towards the sexual display. It allowed them time to get out the back door and get a small lead in front of the pack. Mike and he transported the unconscious coyote away from their exit and ran out the back door into an exiting hallway. The coyotes were agitated. Doc almost passed the set of stairs, “Go down there.”

“What are you going to do?”

Doc held up a blood trail vial—Mel and Mike used them to throw immortals off their human scent. The vials were potent and had a mile radius draw. Doc wasn’t sure how it would affect Michael, “Go!”

“Oh, shit!” Mike covered his nose and darted down the steps.

Doc opened up a room across from the stairwell and tossed the vial against the window, smashing it on impact. He rapidly followed Mike down the stairs and bumped into Mike heading back up.

“Don’t do it, my boy,” Doc said holding a hand up.

“I can’t help it,” Mike started to fang.

“Resist.”

“But the smell...”

Doc held up the tranquilizer gun, “Don’t make me tranq you Mike.”

“Sorry, old man,” Mike charged at him.

“Me, too.” Doc fired the dart into Mike’s heart.

Melissa watched as Michael fell, “*We need to move. Can you possess him?*”

“I can try. I’m not sure it’ll take with him passed out.”

“Try.” Melissa pleaded.

Doc left Mel’s body. He wasn’t sure if he could do this. Immortals were hard to possess. He entered Michael’s body. Damn, he was tired. He tried to lift Mike’s head. Dead weight. He drew a bit more energy and managed to raise his eyes up to Mel.

“Doc, are you okay?” concern etched her face.

“Yeah. I’m not moving fast, these tranqs are killer,”

“The dosage is meant for immortals,”

“Yeah,” his head was spinning as he got up.

Melissa looked up, “I think the blood has them pretty distracted. We are almost to the bottom floor.”

“Okay,” Doc slowly made his way down the last set of stairs. If he was able to run the situation would improve, but he couldn’t summon the strength.

“We will make it,” Melissa whispered as she put his arm over her neck.

“I hope so,” Doc wasn’t as confident, even though they made it to the bottom level garage. He had good reason. The coyotes had figured out the blood was a decoy. They would pick up Melissa’s scent any minute. “Run!”

“Not without you,” she opened the door and Doc tried to lope. He fell. Melissa lifted him up, “Come on.”

“They won’t hurt me.”

“That may be so, but I’m not leaving without Michael.”

Why hadn’t they thought to bring Charles? Even Camilla was preferable to watching Mel get eaten by a pack of coyotes.

They made their way across the parking lot approaching the parked motorcycle. The zombies were drawing interest as well, coming out of the dark corners. They reached the bike, but it was too late. The pack was already down the stairwell and hunting them. Doc guarded Melissa as she climbed on the bike. Once she started the cycle, he climbed on the back seat. Doc used Mike’s body as human shield wrapping all his extremities around her. The coyotes scratched and clawed his back. One bit into his arm, loosening his grip. Melissa raced out of the garage and down the street. Once out of the city, Doc relaxed, letting the tranq dull the searing pain in Mike’s body.

Chapter Five

Drake sat in silence waiting for Melissa to return. He should leave. Fleeing was a wise thing; instead he was compelled to stay. Drake was drawn to her, like a moth to a flame. He had no doubt she would burn him, either; hunters did not mix with prey. Melissa said she didn't kill immortals, but what else could she possibly hunt?

Drake wandered the compound. He found an old server room, some letters scratched off the label. The space was filled with computers and cameras to monitor Area 51 for life outside of earth. Fifty-one Clan descended from scientists, the same scientists who discovered the first aliens to crash-land on earth more than a century ago. Poor creatures, the biologists used the technology and DNA from the captives to create some of the worst killing machines and soldiers for World War Three and Four. It galled him when people thought he was the monster. Humans were always far worse to one another; history proved it. Even now The Clans of the Elements held tentative peace.

Drake scanned the monitor with movement on it. The screen was infrared, the only way humans can spot vampires and zombies, or a cross between the two. Werewolves, cats, and coyotes registered, too, as their body temperature was slightly higher than your average human. He recognized Melissa's outline, and turned the volume up.

"Are you alright? They scratched the hell out of you." Drake agreed. There was warm blood visible on the back of the chilled figure.

"Mel, I'm fine. This is temporary. We will have to stitch it up, though."

"Okay. How long will the drugs last?" she asked.

"Another hour or so, we have time."

"Well, let's lay Michael down."

"Lock him up, he can't be loose."

Drake stared. Melissa was a hunter and planning on killing someone or something named Michael. Drake hated being right. He needed to leave, but continued to watch the monitors, searching until she appeared on another one. Melissa brought the iceman to a cage, helped him lay face down on the cot and left him there.

"Doc, I need you!" She called off screen.

Seconds' later iceman was hot. Hotter than a human, the man was a werewolf judging by the temp registering in the lower left corner. What the hell was she thinking bringing the prey home?

*

Melissa waited for Doc to arrive, "Doc, what kind of closure should we use?"

"Use the cat-gut. It's old school but Mike will heal quickly."

"Yeah, he will." Melissa sighed. She almost forgot what her brother was and how much their life would change.

"Mel! Mel!"

"Oh shit, he's up. The tranq must have worn off." Melissa dashed down the hall towards the open cells.

"Lock the doors!" She shouted to Doc.

"I don't have the energy, Mel."

"Dammit. Charles! Camilla!" She screamed to the ceiling hoping the ghosts would

hear her frantic cries, and yet continued her course.

“Need something?” her nemesis vampire leaned against the door she exited.

“Pull the handle on the end of the wall,” Melissa pointed in the direction he needed to go. She picked up her pace sprinting down the corridor to Michael shouting her name. Michael was about to exit his enclosure when Melissa reached him. She threw her body weight crashing him into the back wall.

“Jesus, Mel,” Michael held her, “What are you doing?”

“I didn’t want you to leave,” the doors locked behind them.

“Okay,” he winced.

“Oh ... your back ... I’m sorry,” she rose to her feet, “lay down on the cot and I’ll stitch you up.”

Michael, got up, shuffled over to the cot and sat, resting his elbows on his knees.

“Turn.”

He complied, “How did you find me?”

“Doc looked through the SHOP footage. We found you at Le Cage.”

“God,” Michael hung his head.

“How did this happen?” concern filled her voice as she sewed his ragged flesh together.

He winced when the needle pierced, “I was tracking a group of zombies along the mountain range, when I found this girl. She was wounded. I took her to a nearby cabin in the area.”

Melissa nodded. She knew the cabin. It was one the siblings used when they went on extended hunts.

“I was nursing her when I noticed the bite on her neck. She already had the fever when I found her, so she was going to turn. There was no time to give her an antibody. She survived the fever, but when she woke up ...” he paused.

“Go on Michael ... its okay.”

“It was like she knew I was a hunter. She feared me. The girl was so upset she started to turn. She bit me during her escape.” Michael took off his sweatshirt, revealing a ragged bite.

“I always wondered why they kept the scar of their first bite.”

“The Vegas Coyotes told me it’s your mark, the sign you were chosen.”

“Is she a coyote?” Melissa wondered if that’s why he was with them.

“No, I was bitten by a wolf. I wasn’t sure until I turned myself.”

“You’re lucky it wasn’t a zombie.”

“Or a vamp, that’s all I need besides the constant hunger is a craving for blood.”

“Oh, it’s not all bad, you get used to it.” Melissa turned to find Drake staring at them.

Michael rose from the cot, the needle and thread still in his back, tossing her behind him. He snarled at the vampire, “Get out,”

“What are you going to do? You’re in a cage, pup,” Mr. Vermillion stated as he looked over the length of the bars.

“What are you doing here?” Michael asked, “Did you follow me?”

“He followed me.” Melissa spoke up.

“She was an interesting find at Le Cage,”

Michael turned abruptly, inspecting her, “Did he bite you? Are you his?” Melissa listened to the rising panic in her brother’s voice.

“No.” she reassured him. Michael had to stay calm.

“If you would be more agreeable, it might change.” Drake spoke inspecting his nails.

“No,” she turned to Drake, “Quit trying to provoke him.”

“It’s what I do sweetheart.”

Melissa felt the heat emanating from her brother’s skin. His fangs were peeking. He dashed back to the bars growling, “You touch her and you die.”

“You can’t kill the undead, pup.”

“Michael calm down. Charles! Camilla!”

The ghosts appeared in the foreground behind Drake, “Ooh, double dreaminess!” Camilla fairly drooled.

“Charles, a little help, please.” Melissa implored exasperated. However, the apparition paid no heed. Charles face was fierce as he used all his energy to slam Drake into the bars, directly in front of Michael.

Michael laughed a hoarse sound, “Charles doesn’t like you old man, neither do I.” Her brother grabbed Drake by the back of his skull forcing his face level with his own.

*

The iron bars were rough and scraped against his cheek. A cold weight forced against his back, grinding his skin against the metal.

“The Coyotes told me you could eat vamps when you get hungry. It requires a pack hunt but I think Charles will suffice.” The wolf dared to lick his ear as if sampling a meal. This boy was going to turn soon. Drake’s blood senses told him the youth was practically boiling to change.

“Camilla, can you try and unlock the door?” Melissa spoke to the air.

Michael turned as if remembering there was fresh meat in the cage with him. Drake snaked his arms in between the bars and grabbed the wolf’s head. He had to hold Michael or Melissa was going to be the main course.

“Let go!” Michael roared throwing back his head.

“Not until she is out,” Drake responded, desperately holding on to the powerful animal.

The wolf lowered his emerald eyes and simply stared at him, “You think I would willingly harm her?”

“Wolves are driven by basic instinct, it’s a fact.” Drake loosened his grip, confused by this turn.

“I love Melissa.” As the wolf spoke, the door unlocked. Melissa stepped out, locking it behind her.

Drake let the wolf go. Michael strode over to where she stood.

Melissa put her hand in the cage, caressing the wolf’s chestnut hair, “I love you, too, and I’ll find a way to help you.” She rested her head against the cage and the wolf did the same until their foreheads touched. Drake’s chest tightened. Why did he care what these lovers meant to each other? So he was going to miss out on the best lay of a lifetime; it meant nothing.

“Come along Mr. Vermillion, I need to formulate a plan and you need to leave.” Melissa turned and marched down the hall.

The wolf laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Drake asked, not at all amused.

“You are, vamp, trying to convince me that you mean something to Mel.”

Drake shrugged an indifference he didn't feel.

"You may want her but she thinks nothing of you. If you were someone she cared about at all, my sister would have used your given name, Mr. Vermillion."

"Sister! She's your sister."

The wolf simply laughed harder.

Chapter Six

Melissa wasn't surprised when Drake Vermillion sauntered in. She felt his presence in the room before he actually spoke. It was unsettling.

"I know how to help your brother."

"It's too late to give him any antibodies ... the virus has run its course."

"Virus!" He crossed the room towards her, "This virus as you call it has been around for thousands of years. It's not something that needs to be obliterated."

"That's not what I meant." Communicating with Drake was proving difficult; besides wreaking havoc on her hormones, he misunderstood everything.

"You're a typical hunter. If it's different, kill it."

"Look who's talking: a hunter."

"I haven't drained a person in over a hundred years."

"Really?" Melissa started, recognizing Drake was not what he appeared.

"Yes, really."

"If so, what did you intend for me?" she asked, wanting to solve this puzzle.

"I meant to bind you."

Melissa fought her rising anger, "You meant to make me your Blood slave?" She was incredulous. She faced him, her azure eyes locked with his. "I don't know what your other conquests have been like," Melissa couldn't help but think of Camilla, "but I don't relish the thought of being a concubine cocktail."

"It doesn't have to be like that." He brushed his fingers through her golden-copper hair.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Vermillion, it usually is." Melissa had seen enough Blood Slaves used over the years to know she did not want the life of a vampire's pet. Many humans considered it an alternative and a way to survive among immortals. It wasn't uncommon for elemental clans to bond with vampires for protection, tradition, or simply profit. The idea of losing one's self and having no free will was appalling to her.

"I've never bound someone before. I wouldn't know."

"What about Camilla?" She asked without reserve.

"I drained her in one sitting."

Melissa was shocked but pleased at his honest motives. She wondered what exactly she wanted of Drake Vermillion, besides his body. "How can you help Michael?" she asked her voice hesitant.

"We will take him to Mojave Earth Clan."

"How can they help?"

"They are tribe of shifters."

Drake expanded, "They will help him adjust to what he has become."

"A Predator." The enormity of the situation weighed upon her shoulders.

"An Immortal. They will teach him to be responsible with the gift he has been given."

"Responsible? How do you know this?"

Drake removed his leather trench coat and lifting the sleeve of his shirt, revealing a Mohave tribal tattoo, "I'm a blood brother."

"I don't understand." She touched her warm hand to his cool skin. When she gazed up at him, Drake bent his head.

Melissa felt the coolness of his lips but she was more aware of electrical currents passing beneath his skin. Compelled she opened her mouth, letting his tongue dance around her own. He reached around and pulled her against him. Melissa didn't resist, she didn't want too.

*

Drake was surprised yet pleased she didn't resist his unplanned advance. Her lips beckoned a kiss from him. Drake deepened his kiss allowing himself to taste the warmth of her mouth. He needed to keep kissing her, he was so hungry, and he was likely to drain her if he pulled away. Drake lifted his head, staring into her indigo eyes and spoke so there would be no misunderstanding, "Melissa."

"Yes."

"I intend to have you." He held her away from him until his desire overrode his starvation.

"Hmm." She wound her arms around his neck, "Okay."

"Do you understand?" His hold tightened on her arms as he grew serious.

"You want to have me?" she asked innocently.

"Oh, yeah."

"Yes." She had no idea what she agreed to and he had no intention of telling her.

Drake's arms enfolded her, one hand in the small of her back. He pulled her firmly against his steely groin.

Melissa moaned, arching her neck back slightly.

Drake lowered his tongue to her exposed flesh. There was no coldness now. The heat from her blood pressed her veins up close to her skin. He grazed his teeth along the column of her neck, testing her response. Gods, he craved just one bite. She shivered.

"Don't be afraid, my angel." He lied.

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are." Drake worked the strange buckles on her tunic.

"Okay." Melissa's face was one of apprehension.

Drake managed to release the buckles and expose her firm young breasts, her rose-tipped nipples begging to be wetted by his tongue. He lowered his head to the peaked rosebuds. Drake heard Melissa's intake of breath but he was undaunted by it. He suckled at the dusky tip taking it between his teeth. Once Drake completed the task, he trailed his tongue across to the other peak. He paused, listening to Melissa's rapid heartbeat. It was lyrical in its excited rhythm. While he wetted the other flushed peak, he unbuttoned and unzipped Melissa's leather pants. They glided easily over her hips. He followed suit, nibbling his fangs along her stomach. When his mouth reached the thatch of red hair, he paused. He couldn't support her weight while she stood. He needed to lay her out. Drake spotted a bed in the corner of the room. It was clear, it would do. He enclosed his arms around her midriff and carried her to his destination. Drake laid her out like a feast on the bed. Once she was splayed out to his liking, he returned to the task at hand. Drake placed one hand beneath her buttocks, lifting her hips up. Drake lowered his mouth covering her mound hungrily. He lapped at her folds. Melissa buried her hands in his hair. Her blood coursed through her veins like a fresh spring, her heartbeat hammered in his ears like a drumbeat. She was getting so close. He took a single finger and inserted it into her pussy,

massaging the slick grotto with skilled movements. Drake transferred his tongue to the swollen bead, now demanding his attention. He took her warm clit between his lips and sucked it. Melissa writhed beneath him.

Melissa's thighs closed over his ears and her hands pulled him closer to her warm damp heat. She cried out suddenly and violently, bucking beneath him. Drake managed to move his head slightly and sink his teeth at the juncture of her thighs, bonding her to him. Her blood tasted sweet. He meant to have just a sampling, but found his hunger and desire to make her his own urged him to take more. He allowed her blood to satiate him until she passed out. He lifted his head and looked at her creamy flesh. Her nether lips were marked, she would be his and nothing would come between them. When he raised his head to check Melissa, he saw his former lover, Cammy watching them intently from the doorway.

"How long will she be out, baby?" she asked.

"Not sure. Maybe an hour."

"Want to have some fun?"

"How so?" he asked, curious what she had in mind.

"Remember earlier at the club?" Cammy touched his shoulder; he shivered at a touch colder than his own.

"Yeah."

"That was me ... I could possess her for old time's sake." Cammy pouted so elegantly, Drake wondered if he ever had a chance.

"I have missed you."

"I've missed you, too." She said before sliding into Melissa's unconscious body, "Oh, I forgot what a draining feels like. It's like you're high."

Drake leaned back and removed his pants.

Cammy leaned up and unbuttoned his shirt. Feathering her hands over his chest, "A girl could get used to this sort of tactile amusement." She reached lower grasping his cock in her hands.

Drake drew a sharp breath, "Damn, Cammy. I'd forgotten what a greedy little thing you are."

"We always were equally matched." She replied as he caressed her rack. She arched into his hands, "So how would you like to abuse this body?"

"How do you want the abuse, sweetheart?"

"Well this is rather bad of me, don't you think," her lip protruded feigned innocence.

"Oh yeah, you've been a bad girl," he grasped her hips and flipped her over onto her stomach, "bad girls always get spanked."

"Promises, promises." Cammy wiggled that ass at him in mock-challenge.

Drake brought his hand down in a resilient whack. Cammy moaned and arched her ass up higher. He rubbed her cheeks until she'd calmed and then—SMACK—Drake lowered his hand once again.

Cammy cried out, "Oh Drakey, I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." he whispered hotly into her ear, "How do you want this?" His body covered her as his hand rubbed along her rump.

"Fuck my pussy," she begged.

Drake lifted back up and pressed his cock at her entrance. She pushed back against him. He slapped her butt cheek, "No you don't."

Cammy tried to impale her slick wet heat back on him and he spanked her other ass cheek. Her rosebud puckered up at him. Using his index finger he slicked it inside her hot box, before circling her anus with it, "Are you sure Cammy-girl?"

"No." her tiny hole winked up at him.

Drake placed his finger at the button of her ass before plunging it in. Cammy whimpered and wriggled beneath his invasion. "I think you want it right here."

"Yes." She panted.

Drake rubbed his cock against her sopping pussy as he pushed another finger into her dark cavern. She pushed back against his fingers and her passage was widening. He worked another digit in and out as his cock massaged her hot slick folds, "Ready?"

"Oh yeah."

Drake removed his fingers and placed his cock at her anus. He pushed in and after a little push allowed his angel's body to adjust. When Cammy pushed back, he pushed in another inch. He reached forward to massage her clit while holding Cammy steady so she didn't rush this. He rubbed the little button until it was hard.

"Drake baby?"

"Hmmm?" He was trying to focus

"You could bite the back, she'd never know."

Drake lost what little control he had. He pushed all the way into the tight channel.

Cammy squealed in delight and turned her head to say, "Now bite me."

Drake bit into the white flesh just under her shoulder and sank his teeth in for a warm taste of blood. He pumped his cock in and out of the hole grasping his cock with a hunger like the one he felt for Melissa. Her blood was sweet on his tongue and her body shuddered in orgasm underneath him. He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. Cammy had left. Melissa was moaning her own cry, "Sorry angel, I couldn't resist the offer." He growled before cumming into her ass.

"I know. I was there." She smiled at him.

Drake softened and slid out of her. He rolled onto his back and brought her with him before allowing sleep to take over.

Chapter Seven

“Don’t look so glum, sugar.”

Michael turned to see the apparition ogling him, “I’m sorry. Your name was?”

She floated through the bars, “Camilla Stevens. You can call me Cammy.”

“And how did you come to join our little club, Cammy?” He quirked his brow at her questioningly.

“Your sister needed my ... skills at Le Cage.”

“You know Drake Vermillion?” His expression stilled as he grew serious.

“Oh yes, drained me, you know.”

“I’m surprised you can be so flippant about it.”

“Well, I did ask him to.”

“Really?” the statement caught Michael off-guard.

“Oh yes. Well, it was that or be turned, which I didn’t want.”

“Sounds like there may be a story here.”

“Perhaps.” Cammy eyed him with a shrewd expression.

“Perhaps you’d like to share it?”

“I suppose we have time.” She sat down next to him.

“We do.” Michael spoke with confidence he was unsure of.

“Well, it was 1979,”

“That long ago.”

“Yep.”

“Sorry, go on.”

“Anyway I was working on Fremont Street as an exotic dancer, when I met Drakey.”

“The vamp.”

Cammy continued as if not hearing, “He was as gorgeous then. He came into the club and asked for a private meeting.” She paused, “You may not know this, but vampires were extremely prominent before World War Four. After World War Three they lost control over their humans and lost all alliances when zombies walked the earth.” She shook her head.

“It’s okay.” Michael rested a hand on her wispy shoulder.

“Thanks sugar, but I digress. I met Drake for a quick drink and knew instantly what he was.”

“You did?”

“I had a gift for finding paranormals. Dated this Warlock once ... what a bastard he was.”

“That is a bequest ... you may well have descendents who received the trait.”

“Doubtful ... lost track of my kin and never had any children,” Cammy waved her hand at him, “Quit side-tracking me now,”

“Sorry.”

“Drake was always upfront about what he was and vampires had so many options for blood. Drinking people was pretty far down on this list. I was never in any real danger, at least from him.”

“But he killed you.” Michael’s ironic tone hid the confusion he was feeling.

“No, he didn’t. I had managed to contract the AIDS virus. The disease was new to the world and many people died from it. It wasn’t until 2200 the first antibodies were found. I had been given a death sentence.”

“So you gave up?” He was befuddled at her bizarre logic.

“Sweetie, I know it’s hard for you to comprehend, but AIDS was a very scary thing back then. Drake wanted to turn me, but I didn’t want to risk killing people.”

“You’re quite the humanitarian.” He grumbled at her.

“Get your hackles down, sugar. I’m trying to tell you underneath that cold exterior, Drake Vermillion is a nice guy and a damn good lover.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Oh, Melissa enjoyed herself.” She answered turning her face away from him.

“WHAT!” Michael rose, ready to grab her by the shoulders, but the specter went through the bars eluding his grasp.

“Doc!” Cammy called from the other side of the cell.

Doc hovered down the hall towards them, “What’s going on?”

“He’s upset.” She tilted her head towards Michael.

“What did you do?” Doc glared at Cammy.

“I may have told him Drake and Melissa ... um ... “ Cammy bit her lip, looking away.

“That the cold bastard is humping my sister.” Michael’s body was warming. He desperately wanted to transform.

“Mike my boy, calm down.” Doc passed through the cell and rested a chilling hand on Michael’s shoulder.

“Calm down!” He glowered at Doc with burning, stern eyes.

“Yes. Can you say you’ve been so holy since you’ve been with the Coyotes?”

“The Coyotes?” Cammy inquired

“Yes.” Both men answered in unison.

“You judge Melissa and you’ve been carousing with the Coyotes?”

Michael stood frozen. His body had stopped transforming under her knowing stare.

“I don’t understand.” Doc spoke up.

“Cammy faced him, “The Coyotes are one of the few were-groups who are more animal than human. They have no loyalty, no tradition, and few boundaries sexually.”

Doc looked over at Michael, “My boy, what have you done?”

Michael stepped forward stopping directly in front of Cammy, “Nothing.” He challenged.

“I doubt that.” Cammy harrumphed.

“I haven’t done anything.”

“No eating your prey while having sex with them? No sleeping with humans in animal form?” She interrogated him.

“NO!”

“Then why the shame, son?” Concern filled Doc’s once-blue eyes.

“I didn’t stop them from doing the things Cammy said, either. I simply walked away. I had no choice. The wolf part of me is too difficult to control. I was afraid I would perform those very acts or worse.”

“They would like having a wolf in their midst. Did you sleep with the Alpha-male?” Cammy asked.

“Why would it matter?” Doc asked.

“If he slept with the leader, he would be submissive to him. The whole pack would recognize this and try to control him.”

“How do you know this?” Mike asked.

“Gee, I’ve been dead in Vegas for almost two thousand years. It’s not like I had anything better to do.” She shrugged glibly.

“What have you been doing Cammy?” Doc asked.

“Rescuing humans from paranormals. There’s nothing better to do.” She spoke without inflection.

Chapter Eight

“Will the Mojave help Michael?” Melissa asked idly as she tickled her fingers over Drake’s bare chest, his faint heartbeat beneath.

“I don’t see why they would not. They are a peaceful clan.” Drake captured her fingers and brought them to his lips, nipping them.

“Thanks,” she smiled against his skin, “you may have saved his life.”

“We aren’t done yet. You can thank me later.”

“You don’t have to go with me. I know where the Mojave are.” She didn’t want to spend time with this man. He was dangerous.

“I can’t be sure Michael won’t harm you.” Drake whispered as he tilted her head up.

Melissa shivered at the possessive look in his chocolate eyes, “We are talking about a four hour bike ride.”

“So think of it as only four more hours to suffer my company.”

“Fine.” She should fight him, but she found she didn’t want to. She wanted to learn more about this vampire she had surrendered to.

“About Cammy ...” he started.

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s call it a hazard of who I am or in your case, just plain lucky.”

“You are such a minx.” Drake grabbed her hips and pulled her on top of him, tangling her further in the sheets.

Melissa wanted to reciprocate the oral pleasure he performed on her earlier. The hard length of his cock bucked against her tender flesh. Melissa rubbed her damp core against the shaft beneath it.

“Melissa?”

“Yes.” She panted breathlessly

“Are you going to satisfy me?”

“We’ll see.”

Drake moved his hand up to fondle one small globe. His lips touched her other nipple and tortured the small peaks with fierce possessiveness.

Melissa rubbed her now swollen clit against Drake’s rigid organ and moaned. She wanted to impale her moist loins to relieve the familiar ache building within her.

“You know what would be immensely satisfying?” He asked her.

“Hmm.” He was distracting her.

“If you came all over my hard cock.”

“Do you need to be inside?”

“Not at all.” He returned his ministrations back to her rose nipple, sucking the cerise bud into his mouth and allowing his fangs to graze the soft swollen breast.

“Drake?”

“Yes.” He clasped her buttocks, splaying his fingers out over her cheeks as he moved her hips against his own desire.

“You can pierce the skin.”

Drake’s fangs penetrated her silken skin and it was enough to push her over. The pleasure was pure and fiery. Her orgasm rocked through her body and she cried out,

“Drake!”

Drake lifted his head away from her nipple. He rubbed the bare skin of her back and shoulders, bringing her closer to him. She almost forgot her original intent when Drake’s shaft lifted to meet her satisfied pussy.

Melissa lifted her head and kissed his lips, lingering, savoring the moment. She had an aching need to continue the kiss. Drake’s hands moved down the swell of her back and he cupped her buttocks, pressing her against the still hard length of his cock. The gentle kneading sent streams of yearning through her. She craved the feel of his organ and longed to take the velvet tip into her mouth.

She moved down and kissed the hollow of his neck and lower still to his umber nipple and took the cool tip into her warm mouth. She circled her tongue around the now erect spike.

“Melissa?”

“Yes.” She lifted her head.

“You can pierce the skin.” His mahogany eyes held a sensuous fire.

Melissa returned his gaze with a burning look of her own. She let one of her hands lightly trace a path down his side before grasping his erect tool with exploratory deftness.

Melissa allowed her hand to close around his sensitive organ, playing her fingers lightly along the length of his shaft before lowering her head to the head of his cock.

Drake’s sharp intake of breath allowed her to smile, “Don’t pierce that skin, sweetheart.” He added with teasing harshness.

“Don’t worry, lover.” She spoke softly, “I have a desire for something else to suck.”

Drake’s laugh was hoarse to her ears but she dismissed it. She reached out her tongue to lash the length of him. At the tension in his body, she continued her assault, wrapping her lips around his cock and allowing her tongue to move along the rigid underside. Drake’s hands gripped her shoulders. She shrugged his hands off, leaning into one of them. He took the hint and threaded his fingers through her burnished hair.

Melissa allowed his hand to guide her movements and pace. His hand clenched against her scalp. Sensing he needed more from her, she took him deeper and at a faster rate. His hips pushed up to meet her warm mouth until he froze and both hands clenched her to him, holding her as he cried out and warm fluid filled her mouth.

*

Drake never lost control so completely, and with a mortal, nonetheless. He was certain she must feel the fire between them, as well. Melissa was starting to anticipate his needs after his bite. Drake remembered the clear image of wanting to grasp her head and mindlessly deep-stroke her mouth. The desire had been overwhelming. She sensed his primal need and wanted to please him. It was distracting.

“What’s wrong?” Melissa asked as the sheet fell from her breasts.

“Nothing. We need to get going ... that’s all.” Drake rose from the bed to put on his clothes. He never looked up from his task.

“Um ... okay.” Melissa followed suit, grabbing a white t-shirt off the dresser and pulling it over her head. She went over to her closet and grabbed a clean jacket and pants. She had finished putting her boots on before turning around and facing him. A cool glance in his direction completed her appearance.

Drake was a complete heel. He went to her and grasped her shoulders, “Are you alright?”

“Of course, Mr. Vermillion. Let’s get my brother to the Mojave so you can be on your way, shall we?” she withdrew from his arms and towards the door.
Drake was left staring after her retreating form.

Chapter Nine

Melissa eavesdropped on the conversation her brother had with the ghostly Doc and Camilla. So her brother thought her deflowered. Damn! He was not going to be happy about this. At least he hadn't turned. She unlocked the line of cells before proceeding down the corridor.

Michael immediately grasped his opportunity and bolted out heading right towards her. He slowed to halt in front of her. He embraced her, inhaling a deep breath, "Go ahead and say it." Melissa prompted him.

"The stench of him is all over you."

"And?" she sensed he wanted to say more.

"I can smell your blood, Mel." His voice sounded ragged.

She pulled back looking into his aquamarine eyes, "Mr. Vermillion is not a problem. Don't make him one."

"Mr. Vermillion?"

"Yes."

"He's out of your graces rather quickly."

"Men are usually disappointing."

"I'm sorry, sis. I can take care of him." Michael left the promise open.

"But who will take care of you, pup?"

Michael looked past her shoulder to Drake, who now stood at the end of the hall.

"Don't, Michael. Mr. Vermillion is trying to provoke you. Don't let him."

"Yep. You should stay on your sister's leash." Drake called out.

"Please, Mel." Michael begged her.

"No. Stay." Melissa turned and started towards Drake. She smiled at the vampire, swaying her hips.

"Miss me, darling?" Drake asked.

"Of course, lover." She responded sweetly. Melissa proceeded to march toward him. When she reached him, Melissa placed her left hand against his face, leaning up to kiss him. The touch of his lips set her body ablaze. Drake's strength still ensnared her. She fought to maintain control. His desire pressed against her abdomen. Her kiss affected him. She pulled away.

"Do you know what you want, sweetheart?" His voice broke with huskiness.

"Of course, lover." Melissa smiled innocently and drew her right arm back in a fist and punched Drake square in the jaw. At his dumbfounded expression she explained, "I want you to quit taunting Michael."

*

Drake rubbed his jaw, watching her derriere as she softly swayed away from him down the hall. She hit hard for such a little woman.

The werewolf laughed unceremoniously in the backdrop.

"You mean the wolf." A muscle flicked angrily in his jaw.

"I mean my brother." Melissa spoke in an unamused voice, "If I have to suffer your presence, I would like it to be relatively painless."

"Won't that be difficult, given our new affections?"

“I have no intention of suffering your affections, as you call them.”

Michael came up behind his sister and put a possessive arm around her, “You can get the hell out now, you bloodsucker. The sun will set soon and you can escape without burning your pretty little hide.”

“You haven’t told him.” Drake folded his arms across his chest, unmoved by the wolf’s retort.

“Not yet.” Her voice was a timid whisper.

“Tell me what?” Michael turned Melissa to face him.

“Mr. Vermillion is going to help us travel to the Mojave Earth Clan.”

“Why?”

“To help you.” She responded softly.

“I don’t need help.” Michael pushed past Melissa to confront Drake, “This is your idea, isn’t it?”

“Actually, yes.” Drake took charge with quiet assurance.

“Trying to get me out of the way?”

“That would be nice.” Drake didn’t deny it.

“What are you going to do to my sister?”

“Whatever she wants.” Drake knew he baited the wolf, but he couldn’t seem to resist.

“What if I don’t leave? What are you going to do then?”

“I guess I’ll have to protect your sister.”

“I can protect her.”

“But who is going to protect her from you, pup?”

“I told you I would never hurt her.”

“The only way to ensure that is if you stay locked up, permanently. Even now you are fighting the change.” Drake smelled the warming of Michael’s blood, “She would let you out and what if ... “ Drake let the pup’s imagination take over.

A fixed look of hopelessness spread over the wolf’s face, “When do we leave?”

“As soon as you are able.” Melissa responded by embracing her brother from behind. Drake tried to remain unaffected by the look of sorrow on her face.

“As you said the sun will be down shortly. We can leave then.” Drake interjected during the soft moment.

Chapter Ten

It took the three of them a little over an hour to pack up all the gear they would need. The two siblings grabbed every weapon available. Drake was surprised at how fast they worked together, "What do you hunt anyway?" he asked.

Michael didn't even glance up from loading the tranq gun, "Whatever looks good on the wall."

Melissa laughed, "He's kidding."

"Now Mel, don't go telling him all our secrets." The wolf winked at his sister.

"Whatever." Drake ambled away feeling left out of their private world. Even the ghosts appeared busy. Doc was checking over their medical supplies. Cammy was watching intently, eyeing between the wolf-boy and himself. Typical Cammy, he smiled at her. She smiled back. Unfortunately it didn't go unnoticed.

"What the hell was that?" Michael asked.

"What?" Drake asked innocently.

"That look with ghosty girl and why can you see her?" Michael continued.

Melissa chewed her lower lip and stole a questioning look at Drake, "You can see Cammy?"

"Yes."

"How is that possible?" Michael looked at him bewildered.

"It's possible because of Melissa."

"What do you mean?" Michael stole a look at his sibling.

"I mean I've tasted your sister."

She shrugged her shoulders. Drake had no intention of telling how he took her blood.

"Melissa, if you are going to play dumb, I will show your brother the bites."

Melissa flushed. No doubt she remembered each piercing of his fangs on her delicate skin and what that would reveal to her brother.

"Don't worry, pup, it will wear off." Drake sensed she was not ready to share with Michael yet.

"Your ability to see ghosts?" Michael asked.

"I would have to drain someone to have their powers permanently."

"Like Cammy?" Michael marched around the table.

"Um, yeah." Drake didn't like this line of questioning.

"Cammy had a bequest?" Melissa finally found her voice.

"She had the Affinity." Michael answered.

"I don't know what you mean." Drake spoke honestly.

"It means she could spot a paranormal or gifted person." Melissa educated Drake, "You can also tell if someone is lying."

"I can do that." Drake hadn't realized Cammy had the ability until he gained it. It had saved his life during the World Wars. He was able to recognize his allies from enemies.

"But the bequest you took from me will wear off?" Melissa regarded him with a tentative gaze.

"Yes." Drake wondered how long the gift would last.

“Good.” Michael said, “You’ve taken enough.”

“I didn’t take anything.”

At Melissa’s cold stare, Drake changed the subject, “Are we ready to go?”

“I think so.” Melissa said, “We only have two motorcycles though, so you can ride with me.”

“Okay.” Drake smiled and headed out of the room to where the garages would be.

*

Melissa wanted to kick herself. She spoke without thinking. Now she would have Drake’s arms enclosed around her for hours. It might prove to be unsettling.

“He can have his own bike and you can ride with me.” Michael offered.

“It’s okay, I can handle it.”

“All right.” Her brother shrugged.

Melissa packed up the last of the supplies they needed and followed Drake’s path out. She struggled with her overpowering need to be near him. Even now she felt a pull to be with him. Melissa should not have let him draw her blood. It was possible he sensed her desire for him and planned to use it against her. Michael’s footsteps treaded softly behind her. Melissa hoped the Mojave helped her brother cope with his new bequest. Michael could hopefully stay with the clan. Most of Fifty-one clan had been killed off or left the area to be with the stronger Nellis Clan. Michael and Melissa were the last to remain in Area 51. If he stayed with the Mojave, she would be alone. She wondered if the Earth Clan would let her stay as well.

When they reached the garage they found Drake on Michael’s Indian Head. Michael was not happy, “You are riding with Melissa on the Yamaha, vamp.”

Drake smiled lazily at her brother.

“Unless you want the bitch seat.” Michael replied with a chuckle.

Drake responded in kind, “We will wait until you actually have a bitch.” He got off the cycle and waited for Melissa by her bike.

“Did you want to ride the other cycle?” she asked, “It does have more room.”

“Now, why would I want to do that when I have the opportunity to cling to your luscious lithe form?”

Melissa was relieved the semidarkness masked the crimson staining her cheeks.

“Now, that’s pretty.” Drake touched her face.

“I forgot you can see blood.”

“Sort of, I hear it better.”

“Hey! Lovebirds! Let’s get going.” Michael called out.

With that, Melissa mounted up, put her helmet on, and started the Yamaha up. They rode into the darkness, three apparitions at their backs. They burned up most of the highway before a flaming arrow pierced Melissa’s shoulder.

*

“What the hell?!” Drake reached over Melissa’s slumped form and gripped the handlebars of the bike to keep from going into the ditch.

“It’s the Valley of Fire Clan!” Michael shouted back, “Keep driving.”

Like there was a choice in the matter. Melissa’s bleeding concerned him. He followed Michael, weaving in and out of the flying arrows. He avoided most of the projectiles until the gas tank was pierced. Drake took immediate action wrapping his arms around Melissa and rolling effortlessly off the bike. Just in time too, the motorcycle

exploded seconds later.

“Melissa!” Michael’s cry was barely audible above the fire now separating them.

Drake stood up, “Go on, you know how to get to the Mojave,” He pointed down the road, “I’ll keep your sister safe.”

“No way, man! I’m not leaving, at least not without her,” the wolf looked for a way to bridge the fire separating them.

“You don’t have much of a choice. Head towards the Mojave! If I don’t arrive in two days time, come back and look for us.”

“I will hunt you down if anything happens to her.”

Drake smiled at the pup’s tenacity, “Whatever it takes to motivate you, pup!”

The wolf nodded agreement and turned south heading down the open road.

Drake needed help, they needed to blend and fast. He scanned the area quickly, Cammy and Doc were still there, and “Can you two do anything?” he asked impatiently.

“Of course. We’ve already located an abandoned cabin where you can rest and hide.”

“Show me.” Drake followed the ghosts toward safety.

Chapter Eleven

Melissa awoke in a cold dark place. It was unsettling. "Drake? Michael?"

No answer.

Melissa started to rise but the pain in her shoulder stopped her movements. She moved the sleeping bag off her shoulder and noticed two fang marks right above a bandaged wound. Melissa should be bothered by the fact the vampire was draining her, but a stronger part of her simply accepted what he was and what he needed to do for survival. Her eyes opened and she saw a faint light from underneath the door. She approached the door tentatively, turned the handle, and opened it to find Drake in front of a fireplace stoking the fire.

"Didn't you hear me?" she asked

Drake turned, "You're awake," He rose to greet her, concern etched his features.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. I figured you'd be out longer."

"I'm fine. I heal fairly fast."

Drake walked over and unwrapped the bandage around her shoulder, inspecting his handwork, "I'm glad you were unconscious when I stitched you up."

"Me, too."

"It does look pretty good, but where's this rapid healing you speak of?"

"I'm never going to heal as well as a vampire," she scoffed at him, "But I don't usually get fevers from critical wounds. My injuries last less than an average human's and I have few scars." Melissa spoke honestly.

"Never question the gifts you've been given."

"Do you question yours?" She regarded him with sober interest.

"My gift?" He laughed hoarsely, "The gift of vampirism?"

Melissa nodded silently, unsure of what to say.

"At first, no, I hated it. I despised not being able to control it."

"You can control it?"

He nodded, "Some vampires choose to let the thirst rule them. If you do, you will get killed sooner. People will hunt and kill you. A vampire is better off hiding what he truly is."

She moved closer to him and lightly touched his cheek, "Is that what you do?"

"I've had to. I wasn't always in control of the thirst, but few young vampires are."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. I'm simply a vampire. I made peace with what I am while with the Mojave clan."

"How long ago?"

"Maybe two hundred and fifty years ago, I made friends with a young were-bear. He's chief now."

"That would make him over two hundred years old!"

"Well he was a hundred when I met him. So he's about three fifty now."

"What?"

"Melissa, you do know that shifters live longer."

"No, I didn't."

He spoke softly, "I thought you knew, since you hunted them and all."

"We don't hunt shifters," Melissa paused, "Drake we don't even hunt vampires."

"Tell me you hunt zombies."

"We do."

He seemed visibly relieved, "Why do I feel like that's not all?"

"Because it's not, Drake. I don't want you to be confused or judge me based on my predecessor's mistakes."

"Melissa, what do you hunt?"

"You know what Area 51 was known for?"

"Besides aliens."

"That was a long time ago. Aliens did land there, and a few survived the crash. The scientists, my ancestors, conducted experiments. It was through alien DNA they were able to develop the Z-virus that created the zombies. Area 51 also housed vampires and werewolves. They manipulated DNA from the gifted as well as paranormals to create abominations. About ten years ago compound security broke down. Most of the subjects escaped. We've only managed to hunt a few species down. We've been working on the most dangerous, those most likely to kill humans. Those less harmless we've let go or tried to bring them back to the clan."

"That's a tremendous responsibility."

"Most of Fifty-one clan left to join more powerful clans. There are usually no more than a few at the compound. I was fortunate to find Michael before the rest of the clan did, they may have killed him once they found out he turned."

"Understandable. So it is best he is on his way to the Mojave."

"Yes, it is."

"Darling," Drake kissed her forehead, "This is nothing concerning me. I'm thrilled you hunt zombies; the world could do with a few less. As for your other subjects, I can help you track them down once we've gotten your brother situated."

Melissa knew it was now or never, speak up and to hell with the consequences, "Well, you shouldn't have to go far, the human scientists are only part of genetic make-up. Michael and I were part of the most recent set of subjects."

*

Drake tried to hide his shock. He didn't know what to say. She was an experiment! He admitted it scared the hell out of him. Drake thought he'd been able to detect any abnormalities in humans, if she even was human. It was entirely possible she was an alien.

"Aren't you going to say something?"

"I'm not sure what to say."

"I understand." She hung her head.

"Melissa, it's that..."

"It's okay Drake. I'm kind of tired; I'm going to bed." When she turned to look at him, there were tears in her cerulean eyes.

Drake watched her shuffle, head down and sniffing back into the bedroom. Gods, he bonded with Melissa. Only she wasn't human, she was something else all together. Melissa was already aware of his feelings and needs. Not caring for her was going to hurt in the long run. He cared for her a little, more than Cammy even. Drake knew of only one

way to show Melissa his acceptance of who she was. He had to at least try.

Chapter Twelve

Melissa knew better than to trust a vampire. She wrapped the sleeping bag tighter around her. There was a tremendous ache in her chest and the tears didn't stop falling.

"Melissa," It was him, the man who broke her trust, "I'm so sorry."

"Go away!" She didn't want or need his pity.

His footsteps crossed the room, growing louder until they stopped. He kneeled next to her, "I'm sorry, let me make it up to you."

"No."

Melissa heard rustling. She turned over to find Drake standing naked above her.

"No means no, Mr. Vermillion," she spoke the words, but didn't feel them. Part of her wanted him to ignore her protests.

"I want you." He spoke plainly

"I would say that's obvious." She was getting damp between her legs looking at Drake's erection. Melissa was speechless. She didn't know what to say, so she simply rolled over, unable to look upon him.

"Did you hear me?"

She nodded against the pillow.

"Look I admit that I reacted badly."

"You think." She sniffled.

"I do." Melissa felt his chest pressed against her back and she shivered.

His fingers traced down her neck along her arm before resting on her hip. A whimper escaped her lips.

Drake kissed the back of her neck grazing skin with his fangs, "You are the only woman I know that can raise the dead." He thrust his erection against her bottom.

Melissa giggled, his humor lowering her guard.

"Forgive me." He whispered against her ear.

She turned to face him and held her arms out in invitation. Melissa allowed Drake's body to cover hers. His cock pressed against her wanton flesh. She arched against him hoping he felt the growing dampness, yet he remained still, "Drake, I'm ready."

"Let's be sure, shall we?"

Melissa didn't understand. Drake simply lifted her in the sleeping bag. She didn't protest. Melissa enjoyed being encircled in his arms. He carried her effortlessly out to the fireplace and lay her gently on the floor. He unwrapped her from the blanket, gazing upon her naked form.

"You are truly beautiful." His voice was husky.

"Thank you." Melissa's blush crept into her cheeks. It was unavoidable.

"That makes you even more so." Drake touched her cheek with such gentleness she wanted to weep. No man ever wanted her and now this man was ready to accept what she didn't even know.

"Why the tears?"

"I can't believe you want me."

"We will talk about it later." He kissed her deeply. Melissa knew it was a stall tactic, but her body didn't care. They could talk about it later. There was no reason to talk about

it now.

“Later then.” Melissa wound her arms around Drake’s neck accepting him as well.

*

Drake trailed kisses along her neck. Melissa ran her fingers across his broad shoulders and down the length of his back. His body shuddered in response against her. He quickly captured her hands and trapped them above her head. She looked up at him in amused wonder. Drake kissed her again, probing against her lips with his tongue.

Melissa opened, allowing him access. He darted his tongue in and out of her mouth as his hips gyrated against her. She widened her legs to grant him entrance into her molten heat. He still did not enter her.

Drake removed one hand from above her head, trailing it down to her breast. He grasped her nipple firmly between his thumb and forefinger, and gently rolled it into an erect peak. Drake leaned down to take the tight pink bud into his mouth. He suckled greedily on the tortured nub. Melissa arched her hips up to meet the hardness of his sex. She needed him desperately.

Drake allowed her other hand to go free as he trailed his tongue down over her navel and dipped his head towards the curly mound of titan curls. He nuzzled his cheek against them before lashing his tongue across the moistness between her legs.

Melissa cried out, unable to withstand the wanton need building within. Drake continued to lash where she most ached for him. She didn’t want his tongue on her; she wanted him inside. “Drake, please.” Melissa wasn’t above begging.

“Melissa, let go darling. Simply enjoy.”

Melissa lay back trying not to think ahead. She allowed the desire and passion she felt to build inside her as he continued to tongue her folds. He allowed his tongue to caress her clit and she cried out. He took the erect nub between his teeth, suckling it as he had suckled her nipple earlier. Melissa cried out, “Oh gods,” she reached down grasping her fingers in his obsidian hair. She clutched at him.

Drake plunged a finger inside her. She moaned in acceptance. He continued to massage her moist sheath with his finger until the pressure was more than she could bear. She reared up rhythmically, meeting each thrust. Melissa let go of Drake’s head and clutched the sleeping bag behind her pressing her palms against the floor and bringing her hips up to meet Drake’s finger.

When Melissa thought she could withstand no more, she erupted in overwhelming spasms. Drake moved up the length of her kissing her. He glided his cock smoothly into her moist center. She was well lubed for his entry.

“Are you okay?” concern filled his voice.

“I’m fine.” She wrapped her legs around his flanks pulling him deeper.

He obliged her wishes. Drake thrust a little deeper testing her response.

She moaned.

He continued to thrust shallow and periodically he went a little deeper until it became a game where she wanted him to pound into her. She arched against him, but he wanted to stay in control. He once again clasped her hands above her head. Drake thrust deeper into her pussy, picking up the pace. His cock moved smoothly along her sensitive inner walls. It was tight but it felt good. Melissa rose up meeting each bump with her own grind until she was panting with ache. Another orgasm was building along the rim, she begged, “Drake I need to...”

“Come again, lover?”

“Yes.”

“What do you need?”

“Can I be on top?”

“Absolutely.”

Drake slid out of her easy and lay quickly on his back. He waited for her to take control.

Melissa tentatively grasped his slick tool in her hand and lowered herself onto it again. She easily found a rhythm, rocking her hips back and rolling forward to allow Drake better access to her breasts. Melissa continued to ride him aggressively as Drake assaulted one globe with his teeth, nibbling it until she was on the brink, only to move across to the other. That edge was close now and Melissa wanted to leap over it. She leaned further forward rubbing her breasts along Drake’s chest. The sensitive tips grazed against his skin, it was Melissa’s undoing, she cried out, as her second orgasm took her.

Drake quickly flipped Melissa back onto her back, “Melissa.”

Melissa wrapped her legs around him, meeting each thrust and clasping him to her. She felt his cock widen inside her sensitive hole before Drake exploded. He groaned in blissful agony rolling his comforting weight off her.

Chapter Thirteen

As Drake lay listening to Melissa's even breathing, contentment filled him. He was so focused on her. He never noticed the intruder until cold metal pressed his shoulder,

"We are taking The Passage with us, bloodsucker," a menacing voice spoke behind them.

"Over my dead body." Drake stiffened against Melissa.

"As you wish." The voice said. Drake's last thought as the silver arrow pierced his flesh was wondering why he didn't keep his mouth shut. He was immobilized and unable to stop the two men from taking the now tranquilized Melissa. He recognized the symbols on their weapons; they were Fire clan. Drake drifted off into an allergic sleep.

* * * *

"Wake up, old man." Drake opened his eyes.

"Michael, what are you doing here? I sent you ahead."

"I know. Chief Shul-ya sent me back, he said my place was here."

"How is Shul-ya?" Drake wondered how his friend was doing now.

"You know, he wasn't surprised to see me. It was as if they were expecting me."

"How so?"

"The Chief knew my name, asked about you and said I needed to return. Good thing, too. I managed to stitch you up but it's not pretty. Where's Melissa?"

"The Fire Clan took her." Drake tried to rise but he was still weak, "They were looking for the Passage."

"Shit! Which clan?"

"I think it was Valley of the Fire, the same ones that attacked us. They had the same symbol engraved on their weapons."

"Well, rest up then. Times a-wasting"

"Blood would help speed my recovery."

"The Chief thought so, he sent this," Michael reached into his pack and pulled out a packet of blood.

"Good old Shul-ya." Drake said grasping the package.

"I'm gonna go rest by the fire. I've got some food out there."

"We need to leave right away."

"Don't worry. I know who took Melissa." Michael said rising to leave.

"Who?"

"Her twin sister Mandy." He closed the door. Drake wondered what sibling rivalry lay ahead.

* * * *

After the second slap Melissa decided it best to open her eyes. What greeted her was her angry sister's face. Mandy was still beautiful and a precise replica of Melissa herself.

"Mandy," she greeted with mirrored hostility.

"Mel, it's good of you to wake up."

"You didn't give me much choice."

"Well, that's probably true. Are you comfortable?"

"You mean sitting on this cold rock with my hands tied behind my back and you hitting me?"

"Yes." Mandy sounded sweet but Melissa knew her to be deadly.

"I'm fine. What do you want with me?"

"Oh, dear sister, I don't want you at all. I want what I've always wanted."

"Michael." Melissa whispered the word. She was being used as bait to lure Michael here.

"Exactly. Now why don't you be quiet?" Mandy shoved a piece of cloth into Melissa's mouth before she could argue with her.

"Be careful what you wish for, Mandy, you may get more than you bargain for." Michael came out of the trees surrounding the camp. The firelight glowed off his skin.

"Michael!" Mandy squealed and bounded toward Michael with unrestrained abandon. Before she reached him, however, Drake swooped down and blocked her path, "Out of my way, vampire. I need to get to my love." She tried to push him aside.

"Your love? But he's your brother."

"Not by blood."

*

Drake looked over at Melissa and Michael, suddenly unsure. This woman was the exact image of his Melissa. If the twins weren't related, did Michael have feelings for Melissa? Or worse, did she once have feelings for him?

"Don't worry, old man," the wolf spoke, "she's always been a sister to me. So have you, Mandy."

"Michael, don't say that," the twin insisted, "I need you by my side. The prophecy dictates the Affinity must love the Passage. The Passage will protect the Affinity from harm as a skilled hunter. I love you. You are a hunter. I'm the Affinity and you are the Passage. Together we can bring peace to the clans."

"Peace! Mandy how can you talk of peace when your new clan attacked us on the road?"

"You were not harmed."

"Melissa was." Michael pointed to where Melissa sat in front of the fire.

Mandy looked over at Melissa, "She seems fine now."

Drake's interest in the subject grew, "What else does the prophecy say?"

Mandy turned away from Michael and spoke, "The Affinity and the Passage can know true happiness. They compliment each other and will bring about peace. They will rule one clan and the other Elemental Clans will have great respect for them. An Affinity is only born every one hundred years."

Drake looked over at Melissa, he couldn't help it, and "How do you know the Passage in the prophecy isn't your sister?"

Mandy simply laughed, "They shall not be related by blood, but a relative will bring them together. Melissa introduced me to Michael; they trained as Passages together."

"Now, Mandy, what's the catch?" Michael shook his finger at her as if scolding her as one would a child.

"There will be no peace if either is cursed."

"Cursed?" Drake asked.

“Cursed as in no longer human,” Michael responded, “which it turns out I no longer am.” He bared his teeth to Mandy as if to prove his point.

“No!” She cried out, “How long?”

“Long enough, the serum won’t work.” Michael answered.

“Can you still see them?” She asked, looking around for apparitions.

“Yes.”

“We can still be together.”

“No, Mandy, we can’t. I don’t love you and without your precious prophecy you have no reason to keep me with you.” He turned away from her, hiked towards the forest and transformed. He howled before disappearing into the trees.

Mandy followed. She called for her men, demanding a search of the forest. She screeched for Michael at the top of her lungs.

Drake took the opportunity to untie Melissa. She removed the gag from her mouth, “So that was your twin sister?”

“Yeah.”

“And she’s obsessed with Michael, who’s not really your brother.”

“Drake,” She whispered before kissing him tenderly on the lips, “He is my brother. If not by blood than in my heart.”

“Melissa, we have to go.” Drake didn’t want to discuss this now. He wanted Melissa out of danger. They walked on silently through the camp. They found two horses to carry them the rest of the way to the Mojave.

“What about Michael?” she asked faintly.

“I think your brother can take care of himself.”

Chapter Fourteen

It took two full days of riding for Drake and Melissa to arrive at the Mojave camp. Melissa admitted her backside was sore. They had both been too tired at night to do anything more than sleep. As much pain as her muscles were in she wondered if she was capable.

The Mojave were bustling back and forth at their arrival. Chief Shul-ya came out of his tent. He was an older man with long gray hair and lines etching his face. Melissa found it hard to believe this was Drake's best friend. Drake was actually older but you never knew it to look at them.

"Kuoto, I see you have brought company." The chief spoke in the name only he dared call Drake.

"Not any company, Shul-ya, this is Melissa, my bonded mate."

"My vision foretold this to me. I also understand we must talk, dear friend." The chief put his arms around Drake and walked towards a hut.

* * * *

Drake told Shul-ya about Melissa and the Prophecy, "What do you think, Shul-ya?"

"Do you think you are the Affinity to which the prophecy speaks?"

"I do not know."

"What do you know?"

"I know I have come to care for Melissa in the few days we have spent together."

"But?"

"I do not care to outlive her."

"You choose now to remove the Curse of the Thirst?" Chief Shul-ya grasped Drake's shoulder.

"I do."

"You know what you must do." His friend lowered his charcoal eyes.

"I may not survive."

"You may not."

"I want your tribe to take care of Melissa. I don't think she has anywhere to go."

"It will not matter, Kuoto, she will no longer be yours regardless of your survival. The blood bond with her will be broken."

* * * *

Drake exited the hut. What if Melissa only wanted him because of the blood bond? Drake never experienced the strong emotion he had with Melissa, the sense of rightness. He had no desire to turn her and watch her suffer if the thirst controlled her. He had even less desire to watch her die. If he did not return to her arms, it was a risk he was willing to take.

Melissa went to him, "Is everything all right?"

"It will be." He spoke as he continued walking, "I have to ask you something?"

"Yes."

“Will you spend tonight with me?”

“Of course, where else would I spend it?”

“I wanted to be sure you were with me tonight.” Drake steered her in the direction of the hut that Shul-ya told him this hut was his for his blood bride.

“Drake, you’re not making sense.”

“It’s not important. I need to hold you in my arms.”

Melissa nodded in agreement.

Drake led her into the hut. There was little in the room besides the bed and a nightstand with a lantern.

Drake clasped Melissa to him, “I need you.”

“Me too.” She responded by tracing her fingers along the back of his neck and lifting her mouth up to his.

Drake didn’t hesitate. He captured her lips with his own, gliding his tongue along her pink lips. Once parted, he slid his tongue inside her warm mouth exploring. His hands deftly removed her tunic, exposing her breasts to his hands. He ran both along her side before each hand caught a breast. He massaged the globes gently allowing his palms to be warmed.

Melissa’s breathing quickened. She pressed into his palms.

Drake’s kiss deepened while his fingers nimbly plucked at her hardened peaks.

Melissa moaned into his mouth.

Drake moved one hand to her back to support her. He traced her spine while taking a nipple between his thumb and forefinger and rolling it. Drake lifted his head to bring his mouth down to the swollen pink tip.

Melissa cried out, “Drake!”

He nibbled her nipple between his teeth. His hands moved lower to her pants and he found the clasp to release them from her. She didn’t protest, in fact she wiggled her ass causing the slacks to fall in puddle on the floor. Drake didn’t want to separate. He held her close and nuzzled her stomach. Her sweet scent wafted up to his nose. It was intoxicating. Drake pushed Melissa back onto the bed and spread her lovely thighs. He gazed upon her delicate opening, transfixed. Drake brought his mouth to her silken juncture and traced his tongue along the dewy folds for a taste.

Melissa raised her hips in response.

Drake continued darting his tongue along her wanton flesh as he undid her boots. She met each of his strokes. He finally flicked his tongue into her hot center.

“Oh yes, please” she cried.

Drake touched the inside of her thigh moving up towards her sheath. He replaced his thrusting tongue with a single digit. Accordingly he moved up the length of her.

Melissa frantically pulled his shirt over his head. She pressed her breasts against him. The pink erect tips grazed his chest. Her slender fingers moved over the waistband of his trousers. He stopped her exploratory hands while his own continued shallow thrusts into her pussy. Melissa clutched at his shoulders. She rolled her hips forward meeting his rhythmic pressure, “Drake, I’m so close.”

“I know sweetheart, let go.”

Melissa did, kissing him as her orgasm convulsed around his finger, “Drake, please join me.” She cooed against his neck.

Drake made short work of his pants and moved Melissa before thrusting his cock

into her. He continued to tunnel in and out of her slick cleft; he plunged his shaft in deeper with each stroke.

Melissa's thighs wrapped tight around his flanks as Drake drove into her feeling his own orgasm approach. He abandoned himself to the pleasure before exploding inside her.

As Drake lay on top of her, he looked deep into her lapis eyes and spoke from his heart, "Melissa, no matter what happens, promise me you won't forget about me."

"I promise."

Drake rolled away and hoped that he, too, kept the promise he made.

Chapter Fifteen

Melissa awoke alone and wondered where Drake was. She dressed quickly to find him. When she strolled outside the morning sun shone bright. Melissa weaved her way through the Mohave's village, nodding at people along the way, searching for Drake. She finally noticed Chief Shul-ya sitting in front of a white hut and strode toward him, "Chief Shul-ya!"

The old man raised his head to look at her but did not answer her.

"Have you seen Drake?"

"Yes." the chief answered stoically.

"Where is he?"

"Kuoto performs the sacred ritual of smudging," at her look of confusion he simply stated, "He is in the adobe behind me." He shook his head as if having no patience.

"Thank you." Melissa shifted to enter the hut.

"Halt!" The chief growled behind her, "You cannot enter. Drake cleanses himself of the curse."

"What curse?" she was confused

"The thirst."

"He cannot cure his vampirism. Too much time has passed."

"If he truly desires, he may cleanse his soul." Chief Shul-ya returned to his meditation.

"Of all the crazy ideas ... " Melissa returned towards the adobe.

"I would not go past the circle of salt, Passage." The chief warned her, "He is guarded by his people."

"I am his mate." She felt that might persuade the bear-chief.

"We shall see."

"How long will the ritual take?"

"It will last seven sunrises and seven sunsets."

"What?!" Melissa finally looked at the hut. It was round, the walls ivory as if splashed with salt. It had four entrances and a fire in each doorway. The fires emitted an aroma of burning cedar and sage. A guardian stood in each doorway. There was also a fire in the center of the adobe and a hole in the top, "You're going to kill him!" she started to break out into a sprint, but before she reached the perimeter of salt she was grabbed by two warriors and brought back to Chief Shul-ya, "Let me go! There is not enough dark, the sun will kill him."

"Kuoto has enough shade to survive. It will cleanse him."

"Why are you doing this to him? I thought you were his friend."

"We do not do anything. He does this for you, Passage."

"For me!" Melissa wanted to know how they justified torturing her lover in the name of her bequest, "Do tell."

"He was told the prophecy of your clan. Kuoto is convinced he is the Affinity to protect the Passage that will lead to peace for the nations."

"Oh, no," Melissa recalled the night she was rescued and Mandy's recounting of the prophecy, "it is a story. A story the scientists told us. It means nothing."

“Passage, if you truly do not believe, then Kuoto will die.” Chief Shul-ya hung his head.

Melissa stopped struggling. She had believed the legend of Passage to Peace when she was a child. Melissa wasn't sure if she believed now. Belief required faith, and when you were raised by scientists, you tended to believe fact more than faith. She needed to find the strength to believe again, it was the only way to save Drake.

“Chief Shul-ya?”

“Yes.”

“I need to believe.”

“Drake believes.”

“I know but...”

“Doubting brings you closer, Passage. Belief will come.” The old chief returned to meditating as if he answered her question. Melissa was simply met with more.

* * * *

It was the fourth night when Melissa noticed the girl with the long jet-black hair in the hut with Drake. The girl was fanning Drake with a large feather, blowing smoke into him. When Drake looked up, his usual brown eyes were hollow without sparkle. His face was gaunt, his body thin and his skin burned. He was obviously starving. Melissa couldn't help but wonder if the girl was there in case he needed blood. When the raven-haired beauty turned and stared with silver eyes, Melissa knew she was no girl. She sought Chief Shul-ya out immediately.

“Who is in the hut with Drake?” she asked accusingly, wondering if there was more to this ritual than cleansing.

“Nizhoni.”

“What is she doing there?”

“She will help Kuoto through this difficult time. Nizhoni shall guide him through this advent.”

“How?”

“She trains to be a Medicine Woman.”

“But she is not fully trained. What if Drake harms her?”

“He would not harm her.”

“Why not?” Melissa asked, fearing the answer.

“Nizhoni is my daughter. Are you jealous, Passage?”

“No. I just don't think it's safe for her to be in there when he is so hungry.”

“He would not harm her.”

“Drake has three days left, anything could happen.”

“Anything.”

“Yes.” All she could think about was Drake falling for the Native princess.

“Including surviving.”

“Of course he's going to survive!” And then leave her for the pretty girl who cared for him all this time.

“It would seem you found your faith, Passage.”

Melissa could do nothing but stare at Chief. Relief flooded her that Drake would survive.

* * * *

The eighth morning arrived and Melissa was awoken with kisses, she opened her eyes to find Drake, a little sunburned but alive staring down at her.

“Drake, you’re alive.”

“Of course. I missed you outside the lodge this morning.”

“I can’t believe I overslept,” Melissa wound her arms around his neck, “How did you get here?”

“I walked.”

“Are you?”

“I no longer have the thirst.”

“You’re not a vampire anymore.”

His face grew serious, “Melissa I wanted to let you know that you are ... free to go. You don’t have to stay with me.” He spoke softly.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you don’t have to stay here, you can go home.” His voice cracked.

Drake didn’t want her anymore. He did want the princess, “Now that you’re human, you don’t want a freak like me, is that it?”

“Not at all. I meant that you are no longer bound to me,” his face flushed.

“Oh.” She should be pissed, but instead she found relief; he may still want her.

“I bonded to you that first time, I couldn’t resist, I found you intoxicating but when you told me that you may not be human, I admit I was scared.”

Melissa swallowed her hope.

“When I heard the prophecy, I felt a calling like my destiny might be with you. Shul-ya told me the bond between us is broken. Even though it means losing you, I still believe it was the right decision.”

“How noble of you.” Melissa turned to leave but stopped short, she needed answers before she walked away, “Drake before I leave, can I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me? If you don’t, I will leave, but you need to know that I still want you.” Melissa couldn’t stop the tears from falling.

“Melissa, my darling, I wasn’t sure what I wanted until you were stolen away.” he covered her face in kisses and whispered against her lips, “Of course I want you. The blood bond may be broken, but I still crave you.”

“I have one more question?”

Drake lifted his head.

“I know you are weak, but do you think you have enough energy to...”

“Absolutely.” And Drake proceeded to show Melissa how human he was.

The End

About the Author:

Before Tina Holland became the Naughty Dutch Girl she was a Nice Dakota Girl. Tina had every intention of writing a “nice” romance with a just a little sex. Her bold

writing style confirmed that “nice” was not what she was meant for. She found a home at Liquid Silver with her first book, “The Pilot and the Pinup” part of her Starving Artist Book Series.

Tina frequently attends Local and National writing conferences. She can also be found on the web at <http://www.tinaholland.com> and <http://thenaughtydutchgirl.blogspot.com>. Tina also welcomes e-mail from her fans at tina-holland@hotmail.com

Blood Betrayal

Celine Chatillon

“Uncle, don’t tell me you had a hand in this—this monster’s transformation?”

Vlad hung his head low. “Not directly, but yes. He cornered me one night in Istanbul seven years ago. He said he wouldn’t harm us if I told him our secret. So I told him about the antibodies in our blood that would pass on the gift of the Kindred ... the curse of eternal life ... “—from *Help! I’m Falling for the Vampire Next Door* by Celine Chatillon (Liquid Silver Books, 2006)

* * * *

Seven years ago, Istanbul

A soft breeze blowing off the dark, rippling surface of the midnight Bosphorus kissed the planes of his cheeks. Vladimir Drakul awoke from his rage and looked down at his well-manicured hands ... His well-manicured hands covered in blood. *Her* blood.

And, for the first time in almost a thousand years, he wept.

* * * *

One month previous, Bucharest

“Vlad, darling, you know how much I want to stay but...”

Sofia Martinelli had it all—beauty, charm, wit, intelligence and wealth. To top off that impressive list she possessed his heart as well—or what passed for a heart in one of the Kindred. Vlad hated getting technical while he was in a romantic mood.

It didn’t stop Sofia from bringing up business, however.

“I have to go back to work,” she said, sighing. “My bosses do need to speak with me at the home office every so often.”

“Yes, yes, I know. You need to be in Milan for the board of directors’ meeting on Tuesday. It’s always a Tuesday it seems.” Smiling, he tenderly removed a stray hair from her cheek. He knew how much she liked to keep her thick, golden locks in place—even after the most unruly of lovemaking sessions. “When will you return to Bucharest?”

She frowned and pulled the sheets up to cover her voluptuous curves. The thin covering didn’t stop Vlad from wanting to take her then and there—the old-fashioned way, the way God and nature intended lovers to be. Fortunately, Sofia was a very modern woman and enjoyed experimentation.

“I can’t say when I’ll be back—it’s not up to me. My bosses say they want to reward me for my excellent sales record. That could mean they’ll take me out of the eastern European division and position me somewhere else where I can improve the company’s sales record.” She gently caressed his cheek then wound her fingers through his shoulder-length black hair. “I don’t want to go. I *must* go. I hope you understand.”

“I understand.”

The words came easily to him, but the emotions behind them did not. He wanted her to stay. For the first time in a millennium Vladimir Drakul felt close to a woman—to *this* woman. He felt more than just the hunger to satisfy his physical needs and ... nutritional requirements. His brain had been engaged by Sofia’s sophistication and depth of knowledge; his heart engaged by her unselfish giving and receiving in matters of love.

Yes, even loners like the Kindred desired intimacy with others at times. The object of affection did not have to be of their kind—in fact sometimes it was better when it came to expressing their sexuality fully. Many of his kind had simply forgotten they possessed genitalia and the soul-stirring sensations that could be engendered there. Vlad was glad he was not one of them.

“We still have this weekend together, don’t we?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

She looked him straight in the eyes, slowly lowering the sheet to reveal her glorious form to him. “Yes, we do. Let’s make the most of it, shall we?”

Spreading her legs wide, she once more welcomed his jutting cock. No pretense, no playing shy or hard-to-get, Sofia Martinelli enjoyed a ‘good hard fuck’ as she called it. It was the pick-up line she had employed that attracted Vlad to her in the first place.

“You do realize strolling the streets of Bucharest at night isn’t the safest thing for an attractive woman such as yourself?” he had asked the golden-hair beauty, standing outside of the best hotel in the city.

This vision in red silk must have come from heaven above, so glorious her shining eyes and moist, crimson lips. Two a.m. and thirsty for more than mere sustenance, Vlad had been wandering the thoroughfares looking for an easy mark, a quick release of his tensions and a warm drink of the life force. Instinctively he knew this woman standing tall and proud in black high heels and a low-cut dress was different. She’d provide more than sustenance for his body ... She would touch what laughingly he referred to as his soul.

“I’m not looking for safety.” She leveled her sparkling gold-flecked brown eyes at him and smiled provocatively.

She seemed his equal in every way. Oh, how he wanted her! He wanted her by his side for all eternity.

“What are you looking for?” he had asked, his tone desperate in his need. “I might be able to help.”

She boldly raked her gaze up and down his tall, lithe form, lingering at the bulge stirring at his crotch. Did she like what she saw?

“I’m out looking for a good hard fuck.” She licked her lips and batted her long lashes. “Perhaps you could help me out?”

“I might be able to accommodate you,” he had replied, chuckling.

And he had delivered on that promise. That—and so much more.

“Harder, harder,” Sofia said now, panting as he thrust vigorously. “Make me strong enough to tell those bastards at the home office where to stick it when they tell me they’re pulling me out of this region.”

He slowly licked his teeth as his incisors grew. “As you wish, Madame Regional Sales Director.”

Hiking her legs up over his shoulders, she shrieked in joy as his swift strokes plunged into her tight cunt. She arched her back and begged Vlad to drive himself deeper

still. With one hand on her clit and the other on a nipple, she helped to stimulate herself until the familiar tremors built and the first wave of her climax overcame her.

"More, more! Complete me," she whispered hoarsely. "As only you can."

He hesitated. "Sofia, you realize that if I drink of your essence frequently that you could ... You could become like me someday. Damned to this plane of existence forever."

"Hmm, yes! To lie in your arms forever ... It would be heaven."

"But to deny the angels their chance to gaze upon you in all your glory would be a sin." He took her hand in his and tenderly kissed it. "I do not wish to bar you from the gates of paradise."

"Your big cock inside me is paradise enough for a sinner like me." Her gold-brown eyes burned wild with desire. She rocked her pelvis against him urging him on. "Fuck death! Fuck *me* to death!" She laughed. "Bite me, Vampire Man."

The temptation grew to more than Vlad could bear. Sofia was of age, and he was more than a thousand years old. If her wish was to become Kindred—and she understood the consequences—then who was he to deny her?

Baring his fangs, he lowered his mouth to the soft valley between her neck and shoulder. The salty taste of her skin and the musky scent of her desire broke down any last barriers. The instant he pierced her flesh and began to lap the warmth of her life force she screamed and shuddered.

"My God! Yes! Yes!" She grasped at his head and pressed his face closer to her skin as the orgasmic onslaught began.

The bond between hunter and prey intensified as he drank freely of her blood offering. He raised his head for a moment to thrust into her with wild abandon, alternately fucking then sucking the flowing sacrifice of her love. All too soon his own completion tore through him with a shout.

"Oh, Sofia, my love, my forever love!"

The inexplicable joy that flooded his consciousness reminded him of the warmth of being alive. Truly alive and not trapped in the present cold, hard existence the Kindred claimed as living.

"More, more..." Her voice grew thin and raspy. She appeared near death's door. Vlad gazed down upon his lover's pale countenance, overwhelmed with a feeling he didn't know he still could experience—

Mercy.

"No, no more, my dear," he said sadly. "I can't take anymore. It's not right." Tenderly he kissed the throbbing bruise forming around the wound and gently laid her head against his chest, cradling her in his arms. "It's not yet your time."

The gentle sound of her breathing lulled him like sweet music. The remnants of his conscience prodded him into experiencing long forgotten guilt as well. So vital Sofia Martinelli was—and so alive! Vlad resolved to do all he could to keep his love on this plane of existence a little while longer.

"My time will come soon, won't it?" she whispered.

"Shh," he hushed her. "Let's not talk of such things. Eternity is forever. We are together now. There's no need to rush things."

"But I ... I want to be eternally youthful. I never want to age. Promise me that, Vladimir Drakul. Promise me that I will always be beautiful in your eyes."

He held her closer and kissed the top of her head. To condemn one so bright and beautiful and full of life to become one of the walking dead ... The unfamiliar twinges of mercy and guilt stabbed at the tattered cloth of his soul. No, it was wrong to want her to be like him. He was decided. He wouldn't let it happen.

"I promise, my dear Sofia. You will be forever beautiful in my eyes. Now, get some sleep."

* * * *

Milan, one week later

Leo Van Helsing stood at his corner office window taking in the beautiful panorama of the bustling city below. He thoroughly enjoyed his current vocation as executive in charge of research at an up-and-coming, international pharmaceutical company.

But he enjoyed his avocation of vampire hunter even more.

When his grandmother had explained to him at a tender young age that their family held a special calling—and a unique gift his family called the "second sight"—young Leo had felt confused but intrigued. As his teen years passed, he became more and more aware of the depths of his psychic abilities. He began to seek out ways to use them to satisfy his own gratification. Tall and blond with steely, blue-gray eyes and classic good looks along with an easy manner, it had been almost too easy for Leo to find willing ... subjects ... to test his powers upon.

His first test involved a snobby redhead in his chemistry class who had repeatedly rejected his advances. A carefully placed suggestion into her subconscious had led to a most gratifying late night make-out session with the leggy girl in the back of her father's car. Leo had repeatedly fucked the little bitch in every available orifice, and she hadn't protested one bit—well, not after he had blanked her mind of the entire experience.

After all, there was no use taking chances that she'd rat him out. His family's virtuous calling was known only to a few, and those morally upright types might be upset that he used his talent in social situations as well. Better to keep his particular tastes in carnal activities quiet. They had a reputation to uphold.

But like any talent, if one did not use it, one could lose it. So, Leo Van Helsing dutifully made certain he practiced his skills at every available opportunity. Sometimes even mixing business with pleasure.

"You slept with him again, didn't you?"

Leo held his sigh in check and turned from the window. It wouldn't do to show his consternation before this woman—this weak-willed woman who craved to be fucked by an abomination before the Lord.

"Leo, you know better." Sofia Martinelli calmly folded her hands in her laps as she sat before him in his cavernous office. "You told me to get close to Drakul, to discover his ... secrets. In order to do that, I have to sometimes sleep with the competitor. It's nothing personal. You hired me. I'm a corporate spy. It's my job, remember?"

"But you don't have to enjoy it so damn much, do you?" He slowly cocked a silver-blond eyebrow at her shocked expression. "Come now, Sofia. We're both adults here, and you know you can't keep any ... secrets ... from me. Can you?"

Crossing to her, he took her delicate chin in his large hand and turned her gaze upward to meet his. He stared deep into her golden-brown orbs, freely plundering and

looting her recent reminiscences and dreams. Sofia seldom put up any mental barriers to him. The woman deliberately left herself open, vulnerable to his mental probing. It was odd for a woman of her caliber—her submission. It was almost like she enjoyed the violation. The ease of his entrance into her mind almost vanquished the thrill of conquest for him. Perhaps that was the point of her acquiescence all along?

Oh, God ... He clutched her chin tighter. He saw it all now in her mind's eye. He relived every feeling, every sensation of how she had last bedded that fiend. They had fucked like beasts of the field, over and over again. The demon had hammered his cock into her mercilessly, pounding her cunt into the hotel bed mattress while he had feasted upon her blood. It was evil and twisted and oh-so-very-very-wrong according to his family's traditions. Human and vampire must never join in such a manner. The scourge of the Kindred must be eliminated—wiped off the face of the earth forever.

He took a deep cleansing breath. Leo had to admit it—deep down, he loved every single depraved moment. Retrieving this sort of information through a psychic link gave him more physical pleasure than the act of sex itself at times. He particularly relished watching Sofia squirm in the present as he raped her memories, stealing her very soul as he eavesdropped on her overactive sex life. The man on the train ... the woman in the airport restroom ... The insatiable slut enjoyed any and every kind of sexual encounter imaginable.

Still, she lusted after that cursed Romanian above all others; the dark creature that possessed so much—control, power, eternal youth.

Damn the bloodsucker! Leo Van Helsing hated to admit his weakness, but what he wouldn't do to become exactly like Vladimir Drakul!

"You enjoy rough sex, I take it? Bondage, too?" he said at last, dropping the psychic link with his underling with a tired grunt. The abrupt cessation of their mental bond rocked Sofia back in her chair as if he'd tossed a bucket of cold water over her.

"What of it?" She sat up straight again and smoothed her expensive blue linen suit skirt with a slightly shaking hand. "I've had to use various techniques over the years to extract information from various clients. It's no big deal."

"You've never offered to have me tie you up, have you?" Leo marveled at the sight of her cheeks reddening. The whore actually could blush—how quaint. Chuckling, he slapped the top of the desk then turned to the sideboard. "Want a drink, Sofia? It's been a long day."

"No thank you. If you're done with me now, Leo, I'll be on my way."

She rose and turned to leave. He reached out and grabbed her by the upper arm—twisting it for good measure.

"I'm not done with you," he said calmly. She gasped and began to fidget as he increased the pressure of his grip. "So, you can feel some pain. Good. I don't want to think you'd become one of them—yet."

"Fuck you." Her eyes shone cold and hard.

"Now, now, you'll get what you want in a moment. But first we need to talk."

He licked his lips, staring down her plunging neckline. Those perky tits of her were begging to be sucked to hard points. The twinge in his groin warned him that it was past time he sampled his employee's wares. But he exhaled his tension and willed himself back on topic.

"I need you here in the land of the living for a while longer, Sofia. After the mission

is accomplished, I'll let you go and you're free to do as you wish—free to fuck as many well-hung devils as your stretched out cunt can accommodate.”

She glared at him. “Drakul will be eliminated? That’s part of your plan, isn’t it?”

Leo shrugged. “It’s unavoidable. I can’t think of a safer way to extract enough of his bodily fluids for analysis without ripping his head off and stuffing his mouth with garlic.”

She flinched. He laughed.

“Oh, please forgive me for being so insensitive to your feelings, my dear. It’s not everyday a woman sleeps with a dead man and houses some of his bodily fluids herself.”

She leveled a hard stare at him. “Stop it, Leo. You disgust me.”

Leo twisted her arm tighter and pulled her closer. “Disgust? You’re one to talk! And I thought you enjoyed the rough stuff. Why don’t you show me how you like to be fucked? Why not fill all your crevices with the cum of a *real* man?”

“Never!” She struggled to extricate herself from his embrace, but he’d have none of it. His gaze took possession of hers and bore deep, then deeper still. With no mental defenses in place, she soon became his willing puppet. He released her and stood back.

“Undress for me, Sofia. Let me view that voluptuous body of yours minus the designer suits.”

Her eyes fixated at a point on the wall beyond him, she slowly began to remove her clothing, piece-by-piece, layer by layer. As she reached around to unhook her lacy push up bra, his breathing caught. The swell of her full breasts was magnificent! She bent to unfasten her silk hose from her black garter belt, but he moved in to stop her.

“Leave them on. I like a woman in black hose and garter belt. Now, come here my dear and demonstrate some of your famous flexibility to me.”

He bent her, face forward, over the surface of his massive oak desk. Roughly he tore off her black lace panties, ramming a digit up her cunt. Ah-ha! Sopping wet like a bitch in heat, like he expected her to be. The dirty tramp! His grandmother had told him growing up that girls who liked sex too much deserved to be punished—and punished hard, without mercy. He quickly unzipped his pants, removed his thick, stiff dick and crammed it into her hole with a grunt.

She gasped. His cold hands kneaded her breasts as he drove relentlessly into her over and over again. She moaned and sighed. Strange, usually his conquests kept quiet while under the influence of his hypnosis. It made no difference either way. He’d have his satisfaction, and knowing Sofia’s tastes, he was certain she wouldn’t protest the rough treatment.

“Ow! That hurts,” she said a few moments later. “My clit is hitting the edge of the desk.”

“You’re awake?” His enthusiasm momentarily flagged. Something about taking a woman against her will was more of a turn-on to him than a willing sex partner. “I must be losing my touch.”

“No, you still have it, you evil, sadistic bastard. I just don’t care to have my pussy cut in half by this sharp edge. Can we change positions?”

“Certainly.”

Leo withdrew and repositioned her onto her back across the glossy, smooth surface. He stood at the edge and hooked her long legs over his shoulders, plunging into her cunt without a warning. She cried out and arched her back in response.

“You like?” he asked casually.

“Hm, yes, that’s good. Fuck me hard with that thick cock. Hard and fast.”

Leo frowned at his partner. Her eyes were closed and her head tilted back, her wet lips formed into an “O” of pleasure. She vigorously rubbed her clit in time with his thrusts like the nasty whore she was, begging for him to bring her to completion like that demon Drakul had done.

Bad girl. He’d show her.

“This is where your vampire lover sinks his fang into your lovely, long neck isn’t it?” Leo chuckled. “Well, sorry to disappoint you, but my teeth are quite as sharp. How’s this?”

He sank his bite deep into the fleshiness of her nipple. She bucked and shrieked and pounded at his back with her fists. Leo felt himself rapidly approaching climax at the evidence of her discomfort.

“No, don’t! Don’t ever do that again,” she begged, sobbing. “It’s not quite the same. Vlad, he ... it doesn’t hurt. It feels good when he does it.”

Leo raised his head. “Really?” The sight of the purple-blue bruise forming on the delicate skin of her breast drove him further toward the edge. He lashed out and bit her opposite breast.

“No!” She kicked and twisted away from him, raising her fists to beat him off. “Get off of me before I scream rape, you devil!”

“I’ll show you what the devil is like, Sofia Martinelli!” Leo roared.

The blood boiled in his veins. She would be the vessel of his wrath. He caught her flailing hands and pinned them to the desk’s surface above her head. Focusing on her wide, frightened eyes, he wasted no time forcing his will into her psyche. This time he made sure she was hypnotized properly before proceeding to sate his lust.

“You will not scream again,” Leo said softly, almost kindly. “You will not scream and you will not resist my attentions—and, most of all, you will not forget this encounter. Ever.”

He dragged her docile form from the desk and deposited her roughly onto the white, plush rug in front of the drinks cabinet. Oh, dear ... His Armani suit had been slightly wrinkled in their altercation. He removed his clothing, carefully folding each piece and placing them on arm of the white leather sofa.

“There. Now we can play rough and not risk staining my outfit. The rug will be a different matter, but it’ll eventually come clean.”

He pushed her to a kneeling position and backed her toward his erection. Grabbing her firmly by her round hips, he drove his rigid cock up to his balls into her ass with one swift stroke. Even under hypnotic suggestion Sofia cried softly as he pounded her over and over again without pity.

Leo tilted his head back and laughed. He felt so good—he felt in control. Empowered and oh-so-close to the edge of ultimate bliss ... But he’d hold back his satisfaction as long as it was necessary—necessary to teach this woman a lesson of who was in charge here—then he’d have her lick him hard again to go another round or ten. He chuckled again at the delicious thought.

“Ah! It’s good to be a Van Helsing. I bet the devil doesn’t have a dead-bolted, sound-proof door to his office.”

* * * *

Athens, two weeks later

“You look lovely tonight, my love,” Vlad said.

Sofia stood staring at the sun setting over the water from her hotel suite balcony. As the dying rays faded from view, she turned slowly, her white, gossamer silk skirt flowing about her like a cloud. In spite of her poised smile Vlad knew ... He knew she had been hurt, frightened. Worse yet, he sensed this brave woman was running away from the source of her fears rather than facing them.

“Thank you. You look quite handsome this evening as well. You always look good enough to eat in black.”

She took his hand and entered the living room. He bent and kissed her palm. She turned her face away from his, hiding the pain in her eyes.

“You see how I’ve made good on my word, Vlad? I’ve found a way for us to be together.”

“I had no doubt you would. But Sofia,” he brushed an unusual stray golden hair from her cheek, “at what cost?”

“Cost?” Her business-like façade dropped momentarily then reasserted itself stronger than ever. “Whatever do you mean? I accepted a promotion. I’m now in charge of marketing in Greece and Turkey as well as the eastern division. I now travel at my own beck-and-call and not the head office’s. I took a giant step up the career ladder. Congratulations are in order.”

“I’m proud of you.” He gently kissed her forehead. “And yet, there’s a sadness about you. Don’t deny it. I sense you have suffered great pain and humiliation.” He raised his hand to hush her protests and led her to the sofa to sit. “There’s no need to explain. Let me help you heal.”

He pulled her into his arms and lowered his lips to hers. She greeted him with her usual enthusiasm, their tongues mating, touching, entwining. Her hands wrapped about him, her fingers digging into his shoulders as if she couldn’t pull him close enough to herself. The scent of her spicy perfume enveloped him, bringing back sweet, bliss-filled memories of their last encounter. But something was wrong. Vlad sensed a hesitation, an underlying tension, beneath her ardent response. He sat back and observed her through half-lidded eyes.

“I can tell you’ve missed me.”

“But?” She smoothed a hand over her coiffed hair, a nervous gesture foreign to her usual repertoire. “You act like you don’t quite buy into my welcome. You don’t really believe that I’ve been looking forward to us meeting again, do you?”

“I believe that you’re holding back information from me. Important information of some kind.” He leaned forward and took her hands in his. “Look at me, Sofia. You’ve never once acted coy or shy in your life, and there’s no need to start now.” She turned her face away from him. It was then that he caught the depth of her distress.

“You’re crying.” He gently wiped the liquid crystals cascading down her cheek and cradled her face in his hands. “My brave darling ... I’ve never seen you in such a state before. What beast did this to you?”

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard as if willing the tears away. “It’s nothing. And he’s not a beast—he’s my employer. He told me that if I don’t come up with something to break open our newest market that I might find myself out of a job. He’s placed a large burden on my shoulders hoping the gamble will pay off for the company,

but if it doesn't ... Well, I will take the blame, and I'll be the one who is sacked."

"Is that all?" Vlad regretted the words before he had uttered them. "Forgive me. I'm sorry. I don't mean to downplay the importance of your position, but a job is a job. I've held so many occupations over the ... years. To lose a job is of little importance in the big scheme of things as long as you have a loyal lover by your side."

She sniffed then smiled. "You're so right. I feel much better now. How could I ever worry over something of little consequence when what you offer me is eternal life itself."

She wrapped her arms about his neck and drew his lips close to the long line of her neck. So trusting, so willing, so inviting...

Vlad sighed. The blood lust rose strong in him. He had not partaken of human blood since the last time they had come together. But if he sank his fangs into her flesh now he'd ... He wouldn't be able to stop until he'd drained her of her last drop.

"Not yet, my love. I need to slake my hunger first for your womanly charms. Then I will receive your generous offering."

He swept her up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. Laying her across the cream-colored quilt, he began by tenderly kissing her from the top of her hairline to the tips of her toes.

"You tease!" She laughed. "Rip off my clothes and fuck me blind before I start thinking you don't really desire me."

"That's where you're mistaken." He slowly trailed kisses from her cheek and neck to the V of her breasts. "The slower I advance, the more care I take to worship each and every inch of your magnificent body, and the more I show how much I want you."

He circled her rosy nipples poking through the thin fabric of her emerald colored silk blouse with a tongue. She arched her back and sighed, urging his kisses southward toward her pussy.

"Hmm, keep going, Vampire Man. I don't mind a bit of nibbling down there."

Vlad laughed. "You are incorrigible. But I will take my own sweet time getting there because you are so very sweet."

He kissed her belly button through the cloth and grinned as she flinched. For all her tough girl exterior, Sofia Martinelli was quite ticklish.

"Liar. You know I'm not the least bit sweet." Her sexy chuckle came from low in her throat. "I'm nothing but a naughty girl who wants you to take her hard and fast, over and over again and if you don't ... Well, I'll find several other studs who will."

He smiled at her idle threat then moved his lips lower to where her ache was greatest. "But the longer I revel in your delicious flesh, the more I show my love and desire for you, for all eternity."

"Hmm, eternal youth, eternal beauty, eternally ... *mine*."

She parted her legs and hiked up her flowing skirt revealing her shaven pussy. The rosy sight and sweet musk of her sex drove him nearly wild. Vlad slowed his assault and spread her thighs further so he could easily slide his face between them.

"What's the delay?" she asked, moaning. "You need an invitation? Isn't the fact I had a Brazilian waxing invitation enough?"

"Yes, it is. I'm just enjoying the view—and what a view!"

He laughed and plunged his tongue into her crevice without further pleading. She squealed her pleasure, holding on tightly to his head as he ravished her sensitive clit. All too soon she climaxed, bucking and thrashing as the tremors possessed her. All rational

thought flew out the window ... She was his to do with as he pleased. The sweet taste of her freely flowing juices left him aching with a need that only she could quench.

"Off with those trousers," she muttered. "I'm hungry for a taste of that gorgeous cock of yours. Fair is fair."

Vlad laughed and did as he was told, quickly divesting himself of his dark slacks and turtleneck. "Never let it be said I disobeyed a direct order."

"Oo, I like the way you stand at attention." She stood, removed her clothes and kicked the expensive outfit to the side without a second glance. "Now line up for roll call, private."

"Yes, ma'am."

Without further pretense she grabbed his cock and gave it squeeze, then slowly began to pump. "Well, your weapon appears to be in good shape, but only an up close inspection will determine if it is or not." She fell to her knees and immediately took his length into her mouth, massaging his balls with her hand.

Vlad groaned. Slowly, tortuously she twirled her tongue up and down his shaft and about the top. His knees almost buckled.

"Request permission to lie down," he said shakily

"Permission denied." Her evil grin contrasted with the sparkle in her eyes. "What, you can't keep upright while I suck you dry?"

"It's ... it's a challenge." She took his cock between her full lips once again and stroked his balls. He bent over and rested an arm against her shoulders. "I can focus more on pleasuring you if we're lying down together."

Sofia paused her assault and laughed. "And I can focus more on making you shoot your cream when I have you completely under my spell. Concentrate on keeping upright, and you'll be fine."

She plunged his length to the back of her throat. Vlad moaned and held onto her soft mass of hair for balance. Her tongue licked faster then slower, then spiraled about his cock as her hands continued to caress his balls. He closed his eyes, trying desperately to remain standing as he came closer to climaxing. Suddenly, she slipped a digit up his ass, wriggling it inside until it was all he could do not to collapse on top of her.

"Slow down, I ... can't..."

With a cry he orgasmed, spewing his seed down the back of her throat. She swallowed, grinning up at him as she helped him to the bed.

"It's been too long, Vlad." She pulled him into her arms and cradled his head against her breasts for several moments before speaking again. "I don't think I can go on much longer without having you near. It's ... almost unbearable the closeness I feel for you sometimes. Is that usual for the Kindred?"

"No, it's not. That's not to say it hasn't happened before, but we're a solitary lot by nature. With our slight psychic abilities, some Kindred bond more deeply than others, but we tend not to build these deep connections."

"But why? To be so close ... so together ... forever." She exhaled a sigh of longing. "It's beautiful."

He nuzzled her breasts and drank in her heady scent. "Hmm, yes, beautiful."

She laughed. "I meant the feeling close part. Why do some shun it?"

"For some, the closeness is not so beautiful," he admitted. "It's painful. They go off on their own because the pain of living with their fellow Kindred is more than they can

stand. My nephew Valentine is one. He left our society long ago and has never once returned home—not even for a visit.”

“How sad. But there’s more pain for me without our ‘connection’.” Sofia rolled onto to her side and gazed into his eyes. “I don’t know what it is, but I feel no pain or fear when you drink my blood, Vladimir. In fact, I welcome it. The release you bring me at the time and the promise of eternal youth ... I desire them both.”

“Don’t speak of that now.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

There was nothing more he could say to convince her but the truth. “Because it is *not* eternal life—eternal life as such was never promised to us.”

“But I thought you said that the Kindred elders claimed long ago those from above came down and endowed your kind with immortality. It was a gift from the gods themselves you told me.”

He shook his head. “Myth, legend—that’s all it is. The Kindred have been cursed with a living death. We aren’t immortal. Eventually someone or something dispatches us from this world. We can’t endlessly regenerate our cells like you seem to think we can. For instance, we can’t regenerate severed limbs or heads.”

“So, who needs a head when you’ve got a cock like yours?” She chuckled and reached down to stroke him into action. “I’d gladly live with this guy stuffed and mounted to keep me company in the bedroom.”

His eyes widened. “Sofia! You shock even me at times.”

“Me? Shocking?” She batted her lashes in mock innocence. “Just because I want to make a dildo out of your giant John Thomas? You can’t blame a girl for wanting a souvenir.” She chuckled. “Better yet, I could make a cast of it and make millions selling silicon replicas to horny women.”

Vlad laughed. “It sounds so ghoulish. You would fit in well with quite a few of my kinsmen. They possess a macabre sense of humor as well.”

She bit her lip and smiled. “Perhaps I am destined to be a part of the Kindred after all?”

“Yes. Perhaps you are.”

She quickly straddled his hips, ramming his cock into her cunt with one swift thrust. He met her gyrating hips with his own tilted thrusts, slowly building momentum until he had her panting and gasping.

“Oh, please ... Please, Vladimir. Bite me. Make me yours. Complete me. Relieve me of this tiresome existence.”

She raised her hands above her head and arched backward, pointing her breasts upward in the glow of the moonlight flooding the room. “I want to be free, free, free...”

He plunged into her harder and faster until her release sent them both spiraling into blissful realms once again. Over and over again she climaxed, the intensity of her orgasms shaking her entire frame. With a final cry she laid her head on his chest.

Vlad sighed. Her fine, alabaster skin glowed in the silvery light. Flesh warm and smooth to the touch, the taste of her more potent than any wine, finer than any caviar, tastier than any comfort food his long dead mother used to make for him. He could drink his fill of her life force, and she’d willingly give it all to him. No fear, no fuss, no fight.

And then a disturbing thought occurred to him: Young and beautiful Sofia Martinelli welcomed death.

The thought deeply perplexed Vlad. It was the complete opposite response of most of his ... acquaintances. Most told him they wanted to take the final step and become part of the Kindred, but a hidden reservation would rear its ugly head before the last step in the process. They'd back out and gladly return to their mundane, mortal lives.

What was Sofia so afraid of in life that death seemed a far safer place?

"You have so much to live for, my love." He gently held her close. "I can wait a few more decades for you to join me. I promise—I won't make you wait forever."

"I want forever now—today." She balled a fist against his chest. "You promised. You promised I'd be with you eternally, Vladimir. I want you to keep that promise."

He had to know. He caught her head in his hands and brought her gaze up to meet his. Her golden-brown orbs filled with tears. "What are you running away from, Sofia? Open up and show me."

Suddenly Vlad found himself in a cold, dank, dark corridor. Shrieks and screams filled the air in a symphony of pure horror. A torture chamber! Even his notorious ancestor the Impaler had shown more mercy than this demon that stood, face in shadow, before him. A tall, fair-haired man with much wealth and power ... He held Sofia's life in his hands. What hold did this brute have over her?

Vlad boldly charged deeper into his lover's mind. She offered no resistance as if this intimate invasion of her psyche was an every day occurrence. And then it became apparent to him what this devil's weapon was ... This monster had repeatedly abused her with his vile thoughts and desires.

A psychic! A true mind-manipulator—and Sofia had been under his control for some time now. Why hadn't he sensed this evil man's presence earlier?

Could it be Sofia didn't realize the depth of this villain's dominance? He may have made mental suggestions that even she with her indomitable spirit and courage couldn't shake—or didn't want to shake.

Which was it? Was she a willing pawn in this beast's plans or his unwitting accomplice? And what was this dark man's ultimate goal?

"Sofia, concentrate. I must know this man's identity."

"No, I can't, I can't..." She shivered uncontrollably in his arms. "He'll kill me if I divulge his secret. He'll kill me."

"But we will face him together. I will be with you, my dear. There is nothing to fear. Lower your barrier and let me see..."

"No! No!" Her eyes went wild with terror. Her body seized at that moment, twisting and turning against the sheets. Caught in the grip of an invisible puppet master, she valiantly resisted. "Don't make me talk ... He won't let me."

Vlad held his lover tighter, kissing her sweat-glistened forehead. "Shh, shh ... It's all right ... It's all right, my love. I won't press any further. You're safe. You'll always be safe with me."

* * * *

Milan, same time

Leo threw back his head against the leather sofa and laughed. "Good girl. You're a good little bitch, aren't you?"

His hand wandered down to the caress the top of the curly-haired brunette temp

secretary kneeling on the floor while she sucked his cock dry. A pleasant enough diversion, his latest subject seemed to enjoy being treated like a dog. No use wasting all the good sexual energy emanating from the psychic link between him and Martinelli in Athens ... Sofia was always good for at least five or six climaxes per session.

Amazing how the link held up. The miles between them didn't seem to matter as much as the emotional intensity of the moment. Sofia had proven herself worthy. She hadn't spilled her guts, and it appeared she wouldn't for a while ... yet.

Best of all, she had lured the demon further afield from his lair. Far from those of his own kind, Drakul's defenses would weaken. Leo frowned. Would Athens be an appropriate place to dispatch his first major bloodsucker to the great beyond? A more romantic locale such as Venice or Paris or even London, along the dark byways where the Ripper had stalked his prey, would have been better,

Oh, well, it couldn't be helped—unlike the blowjob he was currently receiving.

"Off your knees, my dear. I want to perform a little experiment. Are you game?"

The big-boned brunette withdrew his dick from her plump, magenta-painted lips and mutely nodded her approval. She had fought off his advances for some time and the thrill of the chase had increased his desire to have her grovel at his feet. But the trance she was in might not last through what all he had in mind. Still, Leo was feeling adventuresome tonight.

"Stand up. We're going to try an activity called 'who's doing whom'. I'm certain Sofia will like it—and it may just put the fear of God into that demon vampire she's fucking."

Leo closed his eyes and concentrated on Sofia's thoughts. Yes! He could see the two of them lying together on a bed, a gentle ocean breeze blowing in from the open window. The bastard vampire tenderly stroked her hair and back ... He was actually trying to comfort the scared little whore. As if a bloodsucker could demonstrate true affection!

The psychic link strengthened. As Leo opened his eyes he focused his attention on his living voodoo doll before him. "Strip."

The brunette did as she was told. The frumpy brown skirt and coordinated blouse fell into a clump at her feet. Damn! She wore pantyhose, a most unattractive feminine garment. He motioned for her to remove all the remaining barriers.

"Hmm, you've definitely got more flesh on those curves than boney Sofia. But as my grandmother was fond of saying, 'The more the cushion, the more the pushing.'"

He grabbed the temp's hand and pulled her over to face him sitting on the sofa. "Let's see what my femme fatale in Greece thinks about this move." He licked his lips hungrily then rammed a finger up the brunette's cunt, then another and another...

*

"Sofia?"

Her moans disturbed him. She thrashed about the bed as if an invisible man was violating her.

"Vlad, I—I'm not able to fight him off."

He pulled his lover into his arms and held onto her, willing his strength to her. "Look into my eyes. Concentrate on *my* thoughts."

Vlad relaxed his own psychic barriers and plunged into the hellish-dark labyrinth the fair-haired devil man had erected in her soul. Oh, how the bastard could run! Wily he was—and so determined not to be caught and identified. The brute didn't relish losing his

chance to play sick and twisted games with his favorite employee.

Employee? Vlad flinched and momentarily withdrew from Sofia's mind. This evil scoundrel was her boss? How long had he been monitoring her every waking thought? Worse still, how long had he known about Vlad and the Kindred? Who was this blond man whose silhouette seemed oddly familiar?

In the echoing cries of a hundred murdered Kindred, the name suddenly came to Vlad: Van Helsing.

*

"Take all of it in, my dear. Learn some oral techniques from Sofia; hopefully you will retain them. She knows how to give a blowjob."

Leo chuckled as he fucked the brunette's mouth hard. She gagged involuntarily, but the trance seemed to be holding—as was the link between him and Sofia.

Too bad he couldn't say the same for his cock. One orgasm down, several dozen to go ... With a grunt he rammed his balls against the brunette's lips and spewed his cum deep into her throat.

"Swallow it now. Waste not, want not." He urged the temp to lick him to a full erection once more. "Yes, yes ... that's a good little bitch. Lap it all up. Ms. Martinelli will think twice before she opens her mouth, her mind, or her legs ever again."

*

Vlad's sense of self-preservation told him to flee, to leave before it was too late. He had sworn an oath to his fellow Kindred never to reveal their secret to outsiders who would harm them. And this blond devil meant him and the Kindred great harm—that much he could sense from the jumble of Sofia's thoughts. It was enough to know this villain's ancestry. The Van Helsings had been the Kindred's sworn enemies for centuries.

Yes, he would leave now without a second glance. He would continue to exist ... But without his lover it would be just that—existence.

He rose from the bed and walked toward the open window. Something made him turn around and gaze upon Sofia lying vulnerable on the bed. She tossed and turned trying to push her unseen attacker away. Instinct told Vlad it was time for him to transform into a bat, a raven, anything, and flee.

But something deep within him kept him from taking another step. These new and intense feelings of love and protectiveness were all too much for him. Long suppressed memories of heartache and longing surfaced unbidden. He knew then and there that no matter what he couldn't leave her. Not ever, but particularly not while she was suffering this incubus' assault.

"Please, please make him stop." Her cries sounded weak. She seemed so unlike her usual self-assured persona. "Oh, no ... not again."

Her legs parted. She arched her back and her hands flew to her throat. The psychic bastard was choking her as he fucked her.

He was deliberately killing her!

"I ... I can't..." Her eyes bulged and her skin began to pale.

The death rattle would not be long in coming. There was only one thing Vlad could do to save his lover from this demon's clutches. Vlad flew to her side and barred his fangs.

"You will be mine forever—you will be made Kindred, Sofia Martinelli. I swear it. Tonight."

He sank his teeth into the soft flesh between her neck and shoulder and began to feast. The warm liquid burned brighter than his passion for this woman. The coppery taste of her life-giving substance quenched his inborn hunger. Had she partaken of his own body fluids often enough to make the transformation successfully? She had been such an eager pupil. Yes, he was certain of it. He would transform her, save her from this devil employer who thought he owned her body and soul.

Her struggles eased.

“Vladimir ... Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

She released a long sigh and looked directly at him. She smiled. And then she was gone.

Vlad cradled her still body in his arms and closed her eyes. In three days, they would know if the transformation would succeed.

*

The psychic link with Sofia abruptly ended. Leo Van Helsing jerked backward, the mental jolt so strong it felt as if he had been physically tossed across the room.

“Damn the whore! I wasn’t quite done with her yet.”

Leo applied the last bit of pressure to the temp’s throat, smiling as she went totally limp beneath him. At least he had the pleasure of watching this little brunette bitch expire as he fucked her to death with the memento World Series baseball bat he had received from a business associate during his last visit to Saint Louis. He’d return to the city of three rivers someday soon. Somehow, he knew he would. Grandmother called such feelings “hunches,” but he had a better term for it.

Fate.

He rose to his feet and kicked the lifeless corpse lying on his carpet. “Well, well, my dear. Whatever will I do with you?”

Suddenly he had an idea. He knelt beside the body and rolled it over onto its stomach. Straddling the dead woman’s wide ass, he pumped his semi-rigid cock to full attention.

“You’re still warm, aren’t you? You’ll do nicely.” He grinned. “At least, I know you won’t scream.”

* * * *

Istanbul, three days later

“Vladimir, this is a highly unusual request. I ... I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just let us be, Hakan.”

The round, middle-aged man mopped his sweaty brow with a thick handkerchief and continued to stare at the closed cellar door as if he expected the police to barge in at any moment. “I hope you appreciate the risk I’m taking by letting you perform the rite here. It is not customary. I could get in trouble. What will our brethren think?”

Vlad was beyond caring what the rest of the Kindred thought. He was beyond caring what the authorities would do if they knew he had smuggled Sofia’s corpse across an international border to this safe house in Turkey. All he cared about was watching his lover open her eyes once more ... in death.

“The hell with the Kindred!” he growled. “I’ll pay you good money. And I will make certain your reputation as a protector of the brethren won’t be tarnished. You will receive

your reward when the time comes.”

The Turk arched an ebony eyebrow. “I will be allowed into the society of the Kindred?”

“Yes. I’ll make certain of it.” Vlad tossed his black leather coat aside. “Now, do your job and keep the rest of the world at bay while I awaken my charge.”

“This isn’t her home soil?” Hakan asked. Vlad shook his head. The protector closed his eyes and frowned. “It could be a difficult crossing.”

“It can’t be helped. She is far from her home and not safe where she fell. We will have to make do until we can get back to Italy.”

Vlad knelt next to the crate. A crude and rough-hewn box, it was hardly in keeping with its occupant’s highly developed fashion sense. But it had been necessary. With some carefully placed mental suggestions to the border guards, Vlad had convinced them it contained a collection of ancient pottery and that he was a licensed dealer in antiquities. They had crossed the border with no incident.

A faint rustling noise within quickly returned Vlad’s attention to the present.

“Hurry—fetch a crowbar. We need to get her out of this casket.”

Hakan did as instructed without further protest. He handed the tool to Vlad and quietly excused himself from the cellar room. A subterranean location was best for an awakening. It was dusk now on the third day.

Resurrection day.

Vlad carefully pried the lid off and laid it aside. Her delicate hands folded across her ample bosom, Sofia lay robed in a white silk gown, her golden tresses fanned out across the pillow like a sunburst, her plump rosy lips curled in a slight smile. Vlad sighed. So beautiful and serene ... She gave no indication that she was ready to awaken from death’s slumber.

A horrible thought entered his mind. Perhaps he had been wrong—perhaps she hadn’t partaken of enough Kindred antibodies to complete the transformation? There were many variables to take into account and the metamorphosis wasn’t always successful. In his earlier existence as Kindred, Vlad had lost more than one lover to fate’s capriciousness. Death had gladly claimed its intended, leaving him bereft and lost.

He clenched his fists and cursed the portals of hell. No! Not this time!

Vlad had sworn to himself and to his beloved that she wouldn’t rot in the ground. She *would* rise. He took her hands in his, pressed them to his heart, and recited the ancient verse.

“Rise, blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh. Rise and take your place with your brothers and sisters who rule the night.”

Her head stirred slightly. Her lips parted and a small gasp of air escaped. Vlad almost believed in miracles at that moment. He stood and spread his arms wide in joy.

“Yes! Yes! You have arrived on this side of the veil ... You are walking with the Kindred now. Arise, Sofia Martinelli. Open your eyes to your new existence.”

A flutter of lashes and then, with eyes wide open, Sofia screamed.

Vlad winced. Her protracted shriek of terror was to be expected. Waking up in a coffin-like container was disconcerting for the most prepared, let alone for those who may not have realized the implications of what three days as a corpse would be like.

“No! No! I’m not here—I’m not here!” she cried. “Tell me this is a nightmare. I’m not here. I *can’t* be.”

“My dear, you *are* here. You have crossed over and become one of us. You are Kindred.”

“But I was someplace else. It was so ...so ... wonderful.”

She began to softly cry. Her inconsolable sobs of pain and loss cut into the remnant of his soul worse than a jagged blade. He knelt, took her hand, and kissed it.

“Why did I have to leave?” she demanded.

“Because you are here with me, my love. You wanted eternal youth, eternal beauty—and now you have them. We who cross through the veil between life and death only get a glimpse of paradise before we are cast out. It is the price we pay for our immortality. I did warn you of the costs, remember?”

She sniffed loudly and turned her head to stare at him. “Oh, Vladimir. It’s you. I remember now. I’m like you?”

He nodded and sighed. Hakan had been correct. Without the “comforting effect” of the soil of her birthplace beneath her, the memory of the heavenly realms would haunt her for some time. She needed to be grounded to this earth—to this realm of existence. There could be no other for their kind.

“Come, Sofia. I will show you your new *life*, as it is.”

Vlad escorted her from the cellar up two flights of marble staircase to the luxurious bedroom he had ordered Hakan to prepare for them. The safe house was a beautiful mansion on the outskirts of Istanbul, overlooking the Bosphorus and the city beyond.

“I brought all your things.” Vlad pointed to her suitcases parked at the foot of the king sized bed covered in a quilt woven with gold threads. “You may want to change out of your nightgown.”

She glanced down at her apparel and wrinkled her nose in disgust. “How appropriate. While I slept in a converted orange crate you had me dressed in my nightie and slippers. I don’t suppose I need clothing to keep warm anymore, do I?”

He shook his head. “It’s not a necessity, but most places in the world you need it for modesty’s sake.”

“Since when was I ever modest?” She tossed back her head and cackled.

What used to bring a smile to his lips now brought foreboding. Vlad couldn’t place a finger on it, but his lover had changed in the crossing over—and not only because she was now Kindred. Something else must have happened to her during her stay in death’s keep.

“We won’t go out this evening,” he said at length. “I think you need to rest and become more adjusted to your new self and...”

“Can we fuck?” She wiggled her hips suggestively. “Or don’t I want to do that anymore?”

“Let’s take it easy these first few days, my love. First we should...”

“Shit, Vlad! I won’t need to eat—so there goes bingeing at five star restaurants. I won’t need clothing to keep warm—so there goes shopping in Paris for designer duds. And if you tell me I don’t need to fuck anymore I’m going to be one very disappointed ghoul—uh, girl.”

She laughed at her own verbal slip, a cold, harsh sound that sent shivers through him. Vlad approached and took her into his arms.

“We can still make love if that’s what you want, but often the need to join in that manner is quenched by our ... our other needs.”

“Needs?” She sounded puzzled. “Oh.” She broke away from him and stomped about the room, moving a vase about here, pushing a curtain open there. “Hey, where the hell are we? This doesn’t look like the view from my hotel in Athens.”

“We’re in Istanbul. We’re at a safe house. I didn’t want him to...”

He couldn’t say it. No, he *wouldn’t* say it. More than likely, she did not recall the details of her own death and how her employer had used her as a psychic link to gain information about him and the Kindred.

“Who? What?” She skipped about the room like a madwoman, laughing as she plopped into the center of the bed. “Come join me, Vlad, darling. Or is this ‘he’ you speak of more of a man than you are when it comes to making a woman feel good?”

Vlad frowned. “This ‘he’ is not one to be trusted. I’m trying to protect you, Sofia.”

“Then get over here and ‘protect me’ a few dozen times. Remember Bucharest?” She giggled. “I do. I’m glad not all my memories are gone. I remember how we fucked like bunnies all night long. We can still do that, can’t we?”

Her laughter subsided as her eyes filled with moisture. She had died and seen the perfection of heaven, yet still she remained in a realm filled pain and fear. She had suffered a heart-rending loss. He had forgotten what his first days as Kindred had been like; the longing to do things that made one feel ... *alive*.

“Yes, my dear, we can.”

He lay down beside her and pulled her into his arms. Their lips met and their tongues danced in familiar fashion. His hands roved across the long line of her spine down to grip her firm buttocks, squeezing them. She moaned her delight and pressed her body closer to his. She was still his dear Sofia, soft and curvy in all the right places.

And cold as death itself.

As cold as he was at dusk when he rose from his own sleeping compartment. Who was he to judge? The Kindred only gained warmth from their surroundings and by consuming the vital essence of other living things. Suddenly it struck him—he’d never again enjoy lying in her warm embrace, resting his head against her firm breasts as he listened to the pounding of her heart.

For better or worse, she was like him now.

“Hmm, Vlad, darling,” she murmured, “get out of those clothes and put a stake through this vampire’s ... cunt.”

“There’s one thing you need to know.” He rolled off her and began to disrobe. “We don’t use that word. Ever.”

“Cunt? Fuck? Stake?” She laughed then hiked up the silky gown over her hips. Slowly she licked her lips and began to stroke her clit as she enjoyed the show. “I sure hope it isn’t ‘fuck’ or else I will have to go out and buy a thesaurus. I’ve always been a very direct girl, you know.”

“Yes, I know.” He smiled. “We don’t use the word ‘vampire’. It has too many negative connotations. We prefer to call ourselves ‘the Kindred’ or just ‘Kindred’. You understand?”

Grinning, she rolled the straps down, freeing the globes of her breasts. “Yeah, I guess I get it. Just as long as we’re not called ‘zombie’. I’ve never wanted to be a zombie. They’re not pretty at all.” She arched her back and slipped a finger inside her passage and groaned. “Weird ... I’m turned on, but I don’t feel wet at all. How’s that possible?”

He lay beside her and stroked her pussy. She writhed in pleasure. “It’s not

necessary,” he explained. “We aren’t geared for reproduction, so our physiology changes somewhat. We don’t secrete as many bodily fluids. Several Kindred scientists have researched the phenomenon, but it appears to be the norm for us.”

“But you shot cum down my throat—more than once, mind you.”

Vlad smiled at the memory. “Yes, I did. And you always remarked how different it tasted and how you didn’t choke on its volume.”

“True.” She reached for his cock and began to pump it to a full erection. “And I also remarked that you could last all night and hardly needed a rest between orgasms. Did the Kindred Kinsey sex researchers note that phenomenon in their studies?”

“They did. Female Kindred members also have this ability.”

“Really?” Laughing, she spread her legs wide and guided his cock into her waiting core. “So, what else is new?”

He took up the rhythm, and thrust hard and fast—the way she liked it. Her laughter subsided. Something was wrong.

“Harder, harder ... I can’t feel a thing.” She frowned. “It’s like you’re a phantom, Vlad, or I’m a ghost of my former self.”

She pulled back and glared at him. “Bite me. Hard.”

“Not yet.” He caressed her face. “You are still weak from the rebirthing process. We both need to feed before we can enjoy that particular pleasure again.”

“Damn it!”

She hit the sheets with balled up fists. Such a childish display seemed totally out of character for her. The sense of foreboding he felt earlier grew. Vlad knew something had gone wrong ... It was all terribly wrong.

“Fuck my ass,” she snarled. “Let’s see if I can feel that. I want to feel *something*. Anything.”

“You’ve just risen, my love. Your new body and its abilities may take some getting use to.”

She groaned in frustration and pushed him away. “I don’t care. I want to feel something *now*. Fuck my ass. Hard. I want to know that I’m ... I’m still...”

Alive.

Alive was the word she searched for and desperately desired. Vlad sighed. He sympathized, but there was nothing he could do. She would have to come to terms with her new form in her own way, in her own time. And she would adjust and adapt to it. Most Kindred did. Nevertheless, he’d do all he could to please her in the meantime.

He rolled her over to her hands and knees. He gently inserted his length into her tight ass and began to pump.

“Hmm ... Yes, yes, that’s good. Keep it up. I can feel a little something.”

The exquisite tightness sheathing his cock felt as close to heaven on earth as any Kindred male could hope for. He quickened his pace and she groaned her encouragement.

“It’s like I’ve been frozen, anesthetized,” she continued. “I won’t feel numb like this forever—this phase will pass, right?”

“Yes, it will pass—and soon. Do you want me to stop what I’m doing? I’m so close to...”

She laughed and thrust her buttocks back to meet his stroke. “Are you kidding? Go ahead and enjoy yourself. You’ve been waiting for how long? Three days to fuck me? That is, if you haven’t been fucking me as I lay prone in that orange crate. I somehow

remember being violated after I expired.”

Vlad shivered involuntarily and halted his movements. He didn’t feel chilly, of course, but her vulgarity struck a cord of dread even in his cold heart.

“Don’t take me seriously,” she said a moment later. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me since the ... change. I have some odd thoughts—odd memories—in my mind that can’t be mine, but they are in there all the same. It’s like nightmares I’ve tried to forget, but they didn’t go away.”

It was as he feared. The traces of psychic manipulation still lingered in her mind. This did not bode well for her. It meant their opponent was strong—very strong. Perhaps they would need to travel back to Sofia’s hometown sooner than he’d planned to retrieve soil so these dreams would cease in her rest period.

She rocked toward him. “Please, don’t stop what you were doing.”

Vlad picked up his rhythm once more.

“Faster, faster ... Now harder—you can do it.” She reached up to stroke her clit in time with his thrusts. “Yeah, that’s it. I feel it ... I feel it ... I—ah!”

Her first climax took them both by surprise. Vlad kept going until she had her fill before allowing his own climax to overwhelm him. They toppled over in exhaustion.

Lying in his embrace, it was almost as if they were as they once had been. Vlad knew better. They would need nourishment soon, and he would have to teach her how to obtain it. Discretely, of course. But before he could explain the next lesson on their agenda, Sofia rolled to her side, reared her head and bared her new fangs.

“You like?” she asked, eyes gleaming.

He smiled. “Yes, they suit you remarkably well.”

*

Midnight

The city slept. Their hunger did not.

Vlad felt both pride and fear at how quickly Sofia took to the hunt. After he had fed briefly on a prostitute, who frequently serviced the Kindred citizens of Istanbul, he hung back in the shadows and watched his lover, fascinated with her tactics. No qualms, no reservations, she spotted her prey in the discothèque and closely followed the staggering young man into a dark alleyway.

Language was no barrier.

“You want a fuck?” Sofia boldly asked the drunk. His glassy-eyed stare fell to her cleavage that was in danger of falling out of her low-cut halter.

Her victim leaned a hand against the brick wall behind her, his glazed eyes filling with lust as he took her meaning. She hiked up her skirt over her hips, revealing her bare bottom half to his delight. He ripped his pants down to his knees and pumped his dick frantically in order to awaken the sleeping beast.

“Yeah, that’s it, lover boy. Get him good and hard and fuck me against the wall. I want to feel it ... I want to feel that nasty rod in my hot little hole while I suck your brain out with my shiny new teeth.”

She chuckled as he fumbled with his entry. “Calm down now. You’ll be getting yours soon enough.”

Vlad flinched at the sight. Keenly aware that Sofia wasn’t a one-man woman, the sheer joy on her face and her squeals of pleasure as she allowed the filthy bum take her roughly in a dark alley was almost more than Vlad could bear. Yet he had to stay nearby.

Common sense demanded it. This was her first time feeding, and she might need his help.

“Oo! Harder—harder, lover boy. Hmm, that’s it!” she encouraged. The man groaned, his climax imminent. “You got yours and now I’m going to get mine.”

Tilting his head to the side, Sofia bared her fangs and gleefully sank them deep into the jugular. Blood spurted, sending crimson ribbons streaking across her creamy flesh. The life force dripped from her lips, down the long column of her throat, pooling between her globe-like breasts.

“Sofia—enough!” Vlad cried. He flew instantly to her side. He could not break the hold of the huntress from her prey. “You only need a little blood—you’re killing him.”

“Hmm ... tasty!” she hissed, lapping and biting her victim’s neck anew. “What’s the problem, Vlad darling? You jealous that I’m getting some? Oh ... I can feel it. *I can feel it.* Yes—yes!”

She tossed back her head, howling like a wild beast as waves of ecstasy crashed over her again and again. Blood burned like liquid fire bright against her pale skin. Her dying lover continue to bang her against the brick wall like a headless praying mantis, incapable of stopping the dance of death Sofia had begun.

“Hmm ... I think that’s enough now. Thanks for the snack and the fuck, boyfriend.”

She callously pushed the lifeless body away and tugged down her skirt. Turning to Vlad, she slowly licked her bloodstain lips.

She grinned. “That was fun. Can we do it again?”

“I think you’ve had enough for your first time.” He grabbed her by the elbow and hustled her away from the body. “We need to get back to the safe house before the police discover your handiwork.”

She laughed and shook off his hold. “Why should we immortals worry about the authorities?”

“Because we live on this planet, and we are outnumbered.” Vlad walked faster, his feet flying without even transforming to a raven. She easily kept pace.

“I’m surprised the Kindred hasn’t done away with such nonsense.” She sighed. “I don’t get it. Why haven’t the Kindred taken over the world yet? Do they not possess the ambition and the will to do so?”

He should have foreseen this complication. A driven businesswoman and very much a people person, Sofia Martinelli wouldn’t relish keeping a low profile throughout eternity. The mere idea of it would rankle her. And while difficult for her to grasp this foreign concept, grasp it she must. It was imperative she did so in order to survive.

“We’ll talk about the Kindred’s role in society later,” he said. “It’s time for you to rest and regenerate.”

“All right. I suppose there’s no hurry for me to shake things up a bit.”

They sped on in silence, only pausing at a street corner. There Sofia stared straight ahead, entranced. Vlad followed her gaze to see what had captured her attention. He frowned. It was a billboard for a beauty product manufactured by her former pharmaceutical firm.

“You no longer work for them. Remember, you are dead to the world.”

“But there’s no body—how does anyone know that I died three days ago in Athens?”

“They don’t know for sure yet, but the Kindred will cover your exit from your previous existence.”

She wrinkled her brow in thought. “They’ll find a substitute corpse and slip my

passport in its pocket, is that it?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“Too bad you didn’t finish off that hooker. She’d have passed for me with a little more makeup. We’re close to the same build.” Sofia chuckled low in her throat. “You like your women curvy with a little meat on their bones—and I prefer them tall, dark and full of red corpuscles.”

They continued on their journey in silence. Her callousness at dispatching her prey unnerved Vlad. Usually newborn Kindred were loath to take a life or cause undue suffering. Their first feedings were short and incomplete, often leaving them weak and dependent on their mentor for sustenance. Sofia seemed to enjoy the more macabre aspects of her new lifestyle. Why did she act so differently than most?

“Vlad, what if I don’t want to be ‘dead’?” she cut into his troubling thoughts. “Can’t I just return to my position and carry out my duties as I used to—except work third shift instead of first?”

“It doesn’t work that way. I’m sorry.”

A police car drove slowly past them. It appeared to be circling the block. They had to get to the safe house—now.

“Time to fly, my dear. Follow my lead.”

Spreading his arms wide, Vlad summoned the raven within and transformed into the dark bird. Laughing, Sofia did likewise and after a few awkward moments matched his form. They took to the skies, leaving the police behind to wonder whatever happened to the tall, dark man and his fair-haired companion dressed in blood-splattered white.

* * * *

Athens, a day later

“Miss Martinelli did not check out, sir,” the hotel clerk informed Leo Van Helsing. “She simply ... vanished.”

Idiots! The world was full of imbeciles and idiots. Of course, Sofia hadn’t ‘vanished’. She had been transformed into an unholy creature that his family had sworn centuries ago to rid the world of by any means possible.

Yet, technically, she still worked for him, and she was his responsibility. What kind of employer would he be if he didn’t at least put up the pretense of looking for her corpse?

“Thank you for your assistance.” Leo nodded politely then strolled from the hotel. He paused at the black limo parked at the curb. The dying sun glistened on the water, creating a bloody haze low in the atmosphere. It taunted him for his ineptitude.

His top spy must be lurking somewhere near by—right? He reached out with his mind but found nothing. In his previous dealings with the walking undead, Leo had only limited success in reaching their minds. He wasn’t sure if it was possible to access Sofia’s mind in such a manner anymore. But at the very least he should sense her presence in the area.

Nothing.

“You look for a woman with yellow hair now gone?”

Leo turned. A thin figure standing in the shadow of the building took a step toward him. The man drew a long drag on his cigarette then tossed it aside.

“I help you.”

Leo smiled. “Can you? How kind of you.”

The unkempt man appeared to be some kind of day laborer, like an occasional truck driver or furniture mover. “I not kind. It cost you money.”

“Of course.” Leo pulled out his wallet, simultaneously stabbing his thoughts into the telltale’s mind. The man flinched and shuddered but soon calmed, staring blankly into space.

“You will tell me everything I need to know before I kill you.” Leo arched an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Get in the car.” The man walked slowly toward the vehicle. Leo laughed. “Let’s have a little fun first, before I dispose of your stinking carcass, shall we?”

* * * *

Istanbul, two days later

“Ah, my dear Sofia. You have brought me to my prey at last.”

Leo sipped his espresso, or whatever the thick, noxious brew that the Turks like to partake in the mornings was called, smiling to himself as he looked out over the water from the hotel balcony. He had learned that Sofia and her unholy lover had traveled by land since water travel was somewhat uncomfortable for vampires. The greasy little Greek truck driver—Yanos was his name actually—had a great eye for details. He revealed all of Drakul’s machinations, including the house number and street name where he had helped the vampire transport a long, coffin-shaped crate.

Poor Yanos. Had the man enjoyed being fucked to death as Leo mentally raped him as well? He’d never know for sure. But one thing he did know—

Leo loved what was about to come next.

He had decided. He would strike at midday. The sun at its zenith was the vampire’s weakest point in his cycle. And it would be bright—the Mediterranean sun at noon could cook an ordinary man with its brilliance and heat, let alone fry a denizen of the night to a smoking crisp. The two ghouls lying in their crypt wouldn’t have a prayer.

As if God would even listen to their pitiful cries!

Leo laughed and put down his cup. Oh, the joy of sending those fiends to hell—and the pleasure! Yes, he’d enjoy every minute of it. He’d dispatch Drakul first—the bastard ghoul who had taken his Sofia from him before he could punish her the way he had wanted to ... And then, he would send the little slut to hell with a quick slash of his blade across her throat as he delighted in fucking her tight cunt one last time.

He took a deep cleansing breath. He had to gain control of himself before he rose from the table. He could barely walk with such a hard on, and he certainly didn’t want to limp up the steps when he called upon his prey. Leo Van Helsing had his pride, after all.

And he hated complications. The short Turk at the door refused him admittance.

“But I made an appointment to speak with Mr. Drakul your ... employer,” Leo said, smiling politely. “We’ve known each other for some time. And I believe one of my colleagues is here as well, a Miss Sofia Martinelli?”

The man’s dark eyes widen at the mention of the slut’s name. Ah-ha! He knew of her. Leo smiled. She had to be here.

“There is no one here by that name, sir. I apologize, but you must leave now.” He slammed the wide door shut in Leo’s face. The sound of a large bolt sliding into place echoed from the voluminous front hall.

Nonplussed, Leo turned back to the limo and instructed his driver to slowly drive around the area. He would keep an eye on the mansion for the rest of the daylight hours. He knew that when Drakul departed this evening to wreck havoc on the unsuspecting populace the ghoul would be on guard. No doubt the first thing the servant would tell him upon rising from his crypt was that a stranger had come to their safe house and asked for them by name.

Leo smoothed a wrinkle from his pants leg. The element of surprise had vanished, but perhaps all was not lost. He reached out with his thoughts to link with Sofia’s weak mind. Yes, yes, there was something there ... something cold and harsh and lost. He had found her. He would keep her from spilling her guts to her vampire lover about her former boss. And he would make her take care of that pest of a man at the door.

*

Ten o’clock

Leo sat patiently in the limo for several hours. Parked in the shadows around a corner from the safe house he almost gave a cry of joy as the demon Drakul and his Sofia emerged from the mansion. They dressed like a couple prepared to enjoy a night on the town, a night of sensuous enjoyment, if the slut’s skin-tight red mini-dress with plunging neckline was any indication.

Leo smiled. How apropos. Drakul wore a crisp gray suit and light blue shirt. Very fashionable but not quite as well attired as Leo in an exquisite white linen suit and black silk shirt. He liked to look his best for special occasions.

“Follow them,” he informed his chauffeur. The car pulled from the side of the road and traveled a hundred yards then stopped with a jerk.

“Idiot!” he cursed. “I said to follow them.”

“They’ve ... they’ve disappeared, sir.”

“Impossible.” Leo looked out in all directions. They were nowhere to be seen. The demons had transformed into another shape—damn them! Bats and birds seemed to be preferred shapes to shift into, but occasionally a vampire would metamorphose into a larger animal such as a cat or dog.

“Go to where the police discovered that bloodless corpse.”

“But, sir, that’s not a safe neighborhood.”

“Go!” Leo roared. “Hurry or you’ll be lying in the morgue with him.”

The hireling did as he was told and floored the gas pedal. The vehicle zoomed toward the nightspot where the unfortunate victim had been discovered.

*

“Sofia, my love, this isn’t a wise idea. We should go.”

Vlad knew his judgment had been impaired from the moment he laid eyes on her loveliness, but he never could deny Sofia Martinelli—even if it was something she shouldn’t have.

“Oh, don’t be such a drag, Vlad.” She turned with a playful pout and stamped her heels on the middle of the sidewalk, jiggling her cleavage for good measure. “This place was hopping last night. I only had to dance about fifteen minutes before I got that wannabe *GQ* model under my control and out into the alleyway.”

He pulled her to the side, away from the push of bodies exiting and entering the club. "There are other ways to feed," he reminded her. "We don't have to repeat ourselves. Risky behavior often yields tragedy. The staff might remember us from our previous visit."

"But we have to risk it." She batted her lashes, pretending a coyness she didn't possess. "I don't have the mental focus you have. I have to grab my ... nourishment ... the only way I know how."

She raised her arms high and slowly rotated her hips in time with the music bleeding out through the partially opened doorway. Several male passersby turned their heads and stared boldly at her blatant display of sexuality. She smiled.

"See? I have to use my natural charms and sex appeal to lure them into my arms."

"The police are probably patrolling this area after finding your ... previous dance partner. They'll be watching the comings and goings from this establishment. It's just too dangerous."

She pouted. "But I enjoy the danger. It's a real turn on. Remember the first time I picked you up?" She sashayed her hips and grinned. "Don't tell me that wasn't the least bit dangerous. You turned out to be a..."

"Don't say it." He put his hand over her mouth. She giggled. "We shouldn't stay here long."

"Then we'll bring my new dance partner back to the house for a little fun and games. Hakan won't mind, will he?"

Vlad had to admit the protector wouldn't mind it all. Hakan, as Kindred-in-training, had expressed curiosity about their feedings on several occasions. And the man had taken an immediate liking to Sofia. His roving eyes and the bulge in his pants were ample evidence of his desire for her. Hakan would probably enjoy being Sofia's next sex partner after watching her feast, and Vlad was certain she would oblige him ... if she hadn't done so already. He had found the two of them tête-à-tête moments before they had left the safe house.

"All right. You win. But let's keep a low profile. We'll take him out the back way and speed back home. And no taking every last drop this time—agreed?"

She threw her arms about Vlad's neck and kissed him passionately before letting go. "Agreed, my handsome devil. I'm so lucky to have such a non-jealous boyfriend who allows me such freedom. Are all Kindred this open minded?"

Vlad laughed. "After a few centuries, your morality does loosen up some." He held the door open for her. "After you, my love."

They wound their way through the tables and dancing bodies. The heat of the crowd and the stink of sweating bodies and spilled beer made Vlad feel uneasy. There was too much ... life ... in this place. He preferred an assignation in the open, away from the crush of humanity, where he and his prey could both enjoy the moment of blood offering in joyous peace.

Yes, Vlad made sure his partners enjoyed themselves. A quick mental suggestion wiped all memory of their coming together, leaving only the golden afterglow as a reminder of how pleasurable their encounter had been. He must teach Sofia to do likewise. If only she wasn't so headstrong, so independent...

So far from him.

"Sofia!" he called out, but the blaring music and constant chatter drowned his words.

She had gotten away from him and was even now pulling several young studs out to the center of the dance floor. She swayed and rocked and rubbed her body unashamedly against the taut-muscle boys who could barely hide their lust.

He could tell she wouldn't be satisfied with just one. Her craving for blood was tremendous compared with most Kindred. Such heightened appetites had gotten many in trouble in the past. He strode briskly toward her and pushed the circle of bodies aside.

"We're leaving."

"Oh, don't be such a killjoy." She stuck out her tongue like a child then grabbed the hand of the closest stud and pulled him into her embrace. "Constantine here said he'd love to come back to our place and ... party. Didn't you?"

The swarthy, thin young man simply nodded, mesmerized by Sofia's beauty alone.

She slowly licked her red gloss-covered lips and purred. "Yes, Connie here is a real party animal—I can tell."

Vlad shook his head. "All right, he can come. But we're leaving. Now."

He took her hand and led them away from the dance floor to the back of the club. A beaded curtain at the entrance of a narrow passageway looked promising. Vlad halted and motioned for them to be silent.

"This must be the way out. I'll exit first and check it for any signs of observation."

A sudden commotion at the front brought Vlad's attention back to the room. A tall, fair man in an expensive linen suit had entered the club. Heads turned in surprise at the golden-haired god's determined pace. Sofia struggled for release.

"Leo!" She cried, waving. "It's my former employer." She turned and frowned. "Vlad, let go of me."

"Never." He pulled her through the dangling beads and toward the exit. But he hadn't anticipated the strength of her newfound dance partner ... Constantine pulled in the opposite direction and wrestled her from Vlad's grip.

"Woo-hoo!" Sofia laughed as she skipped away. "Let's hook up with that nasty man in white—he really knows how to show a girl a good time."

Vlad froze in place. Two instincts warred within—the need for self-preservation and the need to protect his love. Flight or fight. Such torment! He had only thought of himself and his needs for so long. This burden of responsibility, caring for his newborn Kindred lover, was more than he could bear.

Sofia had made her way to the blond villain with Constantine in tow. She wrapped an arm about the towering man's neck and drew his lips down to meet hers, pressing her curves against his firm body as his hands wandered across her backside and squeezed her ass. Vlad closed his eyes and clenched his fists.

Jealousy flooded him, but he had to think of the welfare of the Kindred. To be caught and dissected by that ... fiend would not serve the good of the whole. He would find a safer way to extricate Sofia from the man's clutches other than direct confrontation in a public place.

He turned and departed.

*

Midnight

From his perch in the eaves of the isolated dockside warehouse, Vlad watched the black limousine approach. It pulled to the foot of the pier and stopped. The back door flung open as if by explosion, and the blond demon stepped out.

“Take our young friend home, driver,” Van Helsing barked while gallantly helping Sofia out of the car. She stood beside him and looked hungrily into the devil’s soulless, blue-gray eyes. He chuckled. “Constantine will be of no further use to us tonight.”

The vehicle drove away leaving the well-dressed couple standing drenched in moonlight by the shore of the dark Bosphorus. They casually strolled beside the abandoned dock. Vlad, in raven’s form, silently flew closer.

“Leo, you never told me what brought you to Istanbul.”

Odd, Vlad thought. Sofia conversed as if nothing unusual had occurred between her and her employer ... As if nothing extraordinary had happened to her in the past four days at all. Vlad had to know more. He slipped into a shadow ahead of them and metamorphosed into his human form.

She slowly licked her blood-drenched lips and frowned. “Hmm, that’s different.”

Van Helsing lifted an eyebrow. “What’s different, my dear?”

“That coppery taste in my mouth. What were we doing with that young man in the car a moment ago?”

“Oh, various things.” His laughter held a heartless, twisted edge of hate in it. “You seemed to enjoy yourself immensely. It’s obvious you enjoy giving blow jobs in the back seat of a limo.”

“I do.” She smiled. “Now, where were we?”

He squeezed her ass and winked. “We were discussing your progress on your latest project.”

“Hmm ... yes, that project. Like I told you before, as soon as I obtain Drakul’s secret I’ll get back to you in Milan.” They stopped to lean against a post. She laughed. “Never fear, Leo. I can handle things. I’m a first rate under-the-covers agent. You can always count on me.”

Vlad saw red and shook with rage. His lover had been this demon’s *spy* all along? Here he had confided in her the secrets of his heart ... the secrets of the Kindred ... thinking she had wanted to join them willingly ... of her own accord ... her own decision.

Had she and her demon boss set him up so he had been coerced into draining her life force, causing her to transform? Was Van Helsing’s scheme to plant a mole inside Kindred society? Create a Kindred assassin for his own gain?

Worse of all, was the love Sofia professed for him a lie? Had she willingly gone along with these heinous plans?

Traitor!

“My lovely Sofia,” Van Helsing said with mock charm, “after a quick mental fuck and a mind sweep you behave so docile and act the innocent—the innocent, no less!” His laughter sounded unhinged. “That’s what I like about you.”

The devil yanked her into his arms. She laughed as he crushed his lips against hers then pushed her hard against the post, hiked up her short skirt and greedily fondled her cunt.

“Hm, Leo,” she purred, coming up for air. “I know I told you more than once that I like it rough, but I’m getting splinters in my ass.”

“Better than a wooden stake through your heart, my dear, don’t you agree?”

She laughed. “You promised you wouldn’t do that if I ... cooperated. Aren’t I cooperating the way you like, Leo?”

He pulled down his pants zipper and shoved his dick into her with one violent thrust and a grunt. “Ah, I’d say you’re cooperating for the moment. But, “ he pounded her hard against the wooden support, “if for one second I believe you’re not doing your job, I’ll personally cut that pretty little head off your shoulders. Understood?”

She nodded and moaned. “Yeah, I got it. And I like it ... a lot. Fuck me harder. Leo. I can almost feel it.”

“Feel it? You mean you can’t feel my thick cock in that tight hole of yours.” He rammed himself faster into her cunt. “You’re almost as cold as death, even after feeding on that Turk. Incredible.” He tore open her blouse and roughly massaged her breasts. “Can you feel that?”

“Almost ... and it’s good. Harder please. Can I bite you, Leo? Just a little?”

Vlad could no longer contain his hatred, his loathing, his burning rage. If she supped the demon’s life force she could turn Van Helsing into Kindred as well ... The vampire hunter turned vampire.

The ultimate blood betrayal.

“No!”

Vlad soared from the shadows like a bird in human form, alighting on the copulating couple and tearing them from each other’s sordid embrace. He flung Van Helsing to the ground and seized Sofia beautiful neck in his shaking hands.

“I loved you,” he whispered. “I bared my soul to you. I haven’t done that in so long and you ... you have betrayed me—you have betrayed your own kind.”

“Vladimir? You’re here. It’s not a dream?” Sofia struggled against the tight grip pressing on her throat. “Oh, I can feel it—the lack of air and the pressure. Yes, keep it up. Fuck me hard against this post and bite me, Vampire Man.”

Her eyes glowed with an evil glint. She grinned like a soul possessed. “Go on. You know I like it rough.”

The blood lust boiled within him. Vlad bared his fangs and tore into her soft flesh of her throat without pity, without mercy. He tore into her over and over again, ripping the skin and muscle from the bone, crushing her spinal column until even as Kindred she would walk the earth no more.

Her eyes closed and she fell, limp and drained, to the ground beneath him.

“I thought vampires couldn’t get so close to flowing water without suffering some discomfort.” Van Helsing stood and dusted his suit off. “If I had known you could, I would have picked another place for our meeting. I see now that this inlet is a bit stagnant. And I’m sure the excitement and adrenalin play a role as well.”

Vlad turned and stared at the man in white, unable to speak. The demon’s smirk showed how little he had cared for Sofia.

Horror dawn upon him as Vlad’s gaze fell to his lover’s lifeless form. Poor Sofia. He had been wrong. She had been this man’s pawn all along.

“Well, Drakul—may I address you by your first name?” Van Helsing cocked an eyebrow and slowly approached. “Vladimir, it’s a pleasure to meet you in person at last. Sofia’s mental images have been accurate, but colored somewhat by her affection for you.

“Her ... affection?”

“Yes, she had quite a thing for you. She thought she was madly in love with you actually.” Van Helsing knelt beside her mangled body and lifted a hand to his lips to kiss

before dropping it. “She thought you held the secret to eternal youth and beauty, too. Somewhat narcissistic, our Sofia, wasn’t she?” He chuckled. “And she always wanted to come first. Not very ladylike of her, now is it?”

He pulled out his dick once more. After several quick jerks, Van Helsing spewed his seed across her exposed breasts with a grunt. “There. Serves you right, slut.” He calmly stood, zipped his pants and straightened his clothes.

“As I was saying,” he continued, “Sofia thought she had a thing for you and that you cared for her. But I know you only used her for your purposes, like I did. We’re very much alike, Vladimir Drakul. Very alike indeed.”

Vlad stared at the mangled golden haired beauty as she lay smiling in eternal death. “How are *we* alike, Van Helsing?”

“We both possess power over others, and we aren’t afraid to use it to our advantage. But whereas I exercise my inherent abilities for the good of mankind by ridding the world of your bloodsucking kind, you employ yours to feast upon the unsuspecting public, changing some of them into monsters like you.”

“Monsters?” The trail of blood ran down what remained of Sofia torn throat and mixed with the cum on her drenched nipples. He shuddered.

“Yes, *monsters*. I wasn’t the one who ripped my girlfriend’s head off in a fit of jealousy. Just look in the mirror and you’ll see who did.” Van Helsing laughed softly. “Sorry, I forgot you’re not capable of looking in the mirror. My mistake.”

Vlad closed his eyes at the accusing spectacle lying in front of him. Sofia ... What had he done?

Van Helsing tilted his head and observed Vlad closely for a few moments. “Hmm, I can tell you’re a bit upset by that revelation, Vladimir. And I’m very sorry about your lady, but all is not lost. I have a proposition for you, one that I feel you, of all vampires, will appreciate and take advantage of.”

“A proposition.” He clenched his fists. “What kind of proposition?”

“I propose that you simply tell me all you know about the Kindred’s biochemistry. I’ll take a sample of it from our former colleague here, but your years of knowledge about the transformation from human to vampire could prove invaluable.”

“Why do you want to know about how we change?”

“Because I could help you, my dear fellow!” Van Helsing clapped his hands and began to pace. The excitement in his voice only added to Vlad’s sense of loss. “Yes, yes! I know I could find a cure for what ails you all—what makes you turn into bloodsuckers. Perhaps the process could be reversed. You could be returned to your former human selves. All would be right with the world.”

Vlad stilled. He could be human once more? Alive—and able to die like other men. Unlike his lover, he’d no longer be forever damned from paradise.

“Isn’t that worth a little cooperation on your part? I could make a killing.” Van Helsing chuckled, covering his mouth with a hand. “Excuse me, allow me to rephrase that. I mean I could clean up in the pharmaceutical business with this kind of information. By studying the process that reverts your kind back to human, we could possibly keep all humans from aging—a venerable fountain of youth. Yes, that’s it!”

Money. Power. Sex. That was all life meant to men like Van Helsing. Had that all it had been for Sofia as well? Was that all there was in life for him?

“Think of the potential, Vladimir—how much you’d *gain*,” the blond devil

emphasized. “What do you say?”

“If I cooperate you will leave the rest of the Kindred alone?”

Van Helsing nodded. “You have my word.”

“Your word?” Anger seethed within Vlad once more. “What good is *your* word, demon?”

The businessman calmly crossed his arms. “My word is good—ask anyone in the industry. But I can tell you drive a hard bargain, and I respect that. You’ll be entitled to a cut of the profits if and when a drug based on this information goes to market. Once you’re human again, you may find a good use for the money.” His reptilian smile revealed its venom. “I’ll have my legal team write up a contract.”

“A contract?”

“Yes, a contract. We’ll both sign it.” Van Helsing snorted. “In ink, please. I’ve had enough of blood tonight to last me for quite a while. Deal?”

Vlad sighed. What could he say? His future existence held no meaning, no promise... nothing without Sofia.

“Deal.”

The blood betrayal was now complete. He had given his word to a hunter; he had betrayed his own kind for the promise of a cure. But what did it matter now? Sofia was gone.

A soft breeze blowing off the dark, rippling surface of the midnight Bosphorus kissed the planes of his smooth cheeks. Vladimir Drakul awoke from his rage and looked down at his well-manicured hands ... His well-manicured hands covered in blood. *Her* blood.

And, for the first time in almost a thousand years, he wept.

* * * *

Present Day, Saint Louis

The shady streets lined with two and three story Victorian era red brick buildings of the city’s original neighborhoods revived him. Vladimir Drakul smiled to himself. Although he was strolling through twenty-first century St. Louis, an Old World European influence could be felt. Perhaps that was what had drawn his nephew Valentine to the city. Or perhaps it was the fact that an ocean separated them from the memories of the Old Country. Either way, Vlad felt happier than he had for a long time to be ... to simply be here.

Strolling through the Cherokee Historical District’s Antiques Row in the late afternoon, when the shadows lengthened and the coming night brought the promise of strength renewed, particularly invigorated him. The eclectic mix of shops on Cherokee Street, ranging from vintage clothing and antique furniture to New Age gift establishments, intrigued him more than the clone outlets found in the so-called shopping malls. Not much in mass-produced, up-to-the-minute items for sale here. Things were cherished here because they were unique and old. He liked it.

His footsteps halted of their own accord, and he looked up. The vibrant colors on the sign had caught his eye and glued him to the spot. He cupped a hand and peered through the front window of Esmeralda’s Vintage Everything and New Age Emporium. Beads, incense, psychedelic patterned scarves, books, classic recordings, tarot cards, Ouija

boards and crystals ... Esmeralda's seemed to have it all.

Something seemed to be calling to him. Something told him this was the place, now was the time...

"Wait." Vlad pulled open the shop's large glass door just as its owner was about to switch her sign from "open" to "closed". "I've come a long way to browse your fine establishment. Will you allow me a few minutes?"

"Why, of course." The woman smiled shyly and stood back, permitting Vlad to enter her place of business.

Vlad gazed deeply into her kind eyes. Instantly he knew he had found what he had been searching for, for a very long time. There was no guile, no deceit within. Only love and contentment and peace and joy ... The ghost of Sofia Martinelli that haunted his heart seven long years could at last be laid to rest.

"Anything in particular you're looking for today?" she asked.

"Only you."

The proprietress blushed the same color pink as her tie-dyed peasant top. "I bet you say that to all the single, middle-aged women you meet."

"No never." He bowed low. "Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Vladimir Drakul."

"I'm Esmeralda Groenig. But my friends call me Esme."

"Esme. A beautiful name for a very beautiful woman."

"Oh, my ... " She giggled as he kissed the back of her hand. "Such a gentleman. That's a foreign accent you have, isn't it? From the Old Country I suspect."

"Yes, you're very perceptive. Come."

Taking her by the elbow, he guided her to a seating area toward the back that featured a low table and crystal ball in front of it. The scent of cinnamon incense filled the air as soft, relaxing Celtic chants resounded from the old-fashioned stereo speakers.

"Look into the crystal and tell me our future. Do we become lovers?" he asked.

Esmeralda giggled and blushed again. "Oh, my ... You are such a smooth talker. And I am so out of practice at the flirting game."

She pulled the glass ball closer, looking intently into the mists of time. "I see a tall man in dark clothes walking down Cherokee Street. It could be you."

Vlad smiled. "It is."

"And I see a rather chubby woman with long, graying hair and beads standing beside you."

"Ah, then that cannot be you then. For you are delicate like a flower and have the countenance of a young schoolgirl."

"Flattery will get you everywhere!" Chuckling, she continued to search the images. "No, it's me all right. I recognize my authentic Woodstock love beads."

Vlad took her hand in his. "Then we will become lovers?"

Esmeralda gasped, mesmerized by the gleam in his dark eyes. "It appears so."

Vlad stood and pulled her into his arms, crushing his lips against hers. She moaned and pressed her well-rounded curves closer to his body as his hands roved across her hips.

"Let us not waste anymore time," he said softly, caressing her gray-streaked brown hair. "I want you to be with me now ... and for all eternity. Do you agree?"

She sighed, nodding. "Yes. Yes, I want to be with you, Vladimir. It seems we were destined to be together."

Vlad sank his fangs into the sweet flesh of her neck, drinking in his lover's strength. Esmeralda cried out then moaned with pleasure as he gently laid her across a low sofa beside the table.

Too long had he waited. Too long had he mourned the loss of what had only been a phantom of love. This time he would hold tightly to his lover and protect her whatever the cost. He swore he would never betray her—or his own kind—ever again.

The End

About the Author:

Celine Chatillon is the alter ego of multi-published contemporary romance novelist, Cynthianna Appel (<http://www.cynthianna.com>). Celine finds writing erotica a very pleasant departure from her day job as a small press manuscript reader.

Celine has released contemporary, paranormal, futuristic and sf/comedy erotic romance tales. Her first LSB title is *Help I'm Falling for the Vampire Next Door*. Many more stories of erotic fun and wonder are in the works or under contract at this time. Be patient, please.

Celine has a yahoogroup announcement newsletter (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/celinesdreams>), a MySpace.com site (<http://myspace.com/celinechatillon>) and a blog "Celine's Dreams" (<http://celinesdreams.blogspot.com>). She may have other blogs elsewhere online, but she's mislaid them along with the batteries for her vibrator.

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