



A DARKER PASSION

by

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Gentle hands smoothed her hair. Aimee sighed, turning her face toward that feather-soft caress. The wonderful touch glided lower, mapping the contours of her cheek, tracing the outline of her lips, leaving tendrils of desire flaming in its wake.

Warm lips brushed her forehead, lingering tenderly over the sore spot at her temple. Strong arms enveloped her, promising shelter, sanctuary. She snuggled deeper into that embrace of velvet-steel.

"Help me," she whispered.

"You're safe," said a deep, melodic voice beside her ear. "Rest now." The words rumbled through his chest. Like listening to a lion purr, she thought dimly.

"Rest," she repeated, sinking back into the mound of pillows. She nestled deep under the comforting weight of the duvet being pulled up around her chin.

Those silky lips again, this time against hers. A weightless yet enticing kiss. Then there was only the silent air where his hot mouth had been. As if from far away, she heard the window being drawn up, the slap of the heavy drapery falling back into place. For a moment, she wondered fuzzily about it, then sleep rose up in gentle waves to drag her under.

* * * *

Watery sunlight splashed the room in translucent amber. Aimee sat up gingerly. The left side of her face ached between temple and jaw. She rubbed at it, questing after the hazy half-thoughts that lingered just beyond comprehension's reach.

The comforter fell away, revealing not her usual flannel nightshirt but the lacy bra and panties she'd put on yesterday. On the chair beside the bed a pair of muddy jeans and an equally soiled kangaroo sweatshirt were folded neatly.

Knitting her eyebrows together, she tried to recall how she came to be so dirty. Memories of delightful sensation swirled through her mind like a tornado, obliterating all other thought.

"Aimee" She could hear that dulcet voice as clearly as if he stood beside her still.

"Safe," he said. And she believed him.

Who? she wondered desperately. Who said that?

Of one thing she was certain, something awful happened to her last night. Someone rescued her, brought her safely home. And then vanished as surely as the shadows.

Frowning, she wandered toward the round mirror above her dresser.

Sapphire eyes, still heavy from sleep, stared back at her. Her dark hair was hopelessly tangled, as though it had been tossed this way and that by the wind. Radiating out from her temple was a nasty looking purple bruise.

Last night

The sun was a crimson memory by the time she reached the parkette. Wind snatched at her hair with chill fingers. Grass, crisp with frost crunched underfoot as she set out to search for the man she'd come to call 'the phantom'.

For months, she'd tracked this newcomer. After two years with the shelter's outreach service, she knew every character in the street community. Some accepted her offers of coffee and blankets grudgingly, others had

become her friends. But none stirred her sympathy more than the dark man with the haunted eyes.

They circled on the periphery of each other's territory. He steadfastly refused her efforts to make contact, fading into the darkness, leaving her to wonder if he was simply a trick of light and shade. Though she assured herself there were always going to be people who would not accept her help, last night when the mercury threatened to plummet to unseasonable depths, she'd taken an extra blanket on her rounds and resolved to give him one more try.

As soon as she entered the deserted park, Aimee realized her mistake. She shouldn't have come here so late alone. Sheltered from the bustle of the street, the park seemed to pause like an indrawn breath. Just a quick look, she promised herself.

Aimee peered into layers of darkness upon darkness, searching for him, sensing rather than seeing he was there.

From the shadows behind, the sound of footsteps sent her whirling to face him.

"There you are," she said, relieved. "I brought you a blanket, it's going to be cold"

Alas, not him at all. It took only a glimpse at the rough-looking pair who barred her path to understand the situation.

I'm not carrying any money. They sauntered toward her, army surplus boots eating up the ground as they approached. The zippers on their leather jackets jingled as they moved. A more chilling thought occurred to her. What if it isn't money they want?

Then she was running, falling, smacking her forehead against the park bench that seemed to rear up out of nowhere in the darkness.

Falling again into strong arms. A resonant voice murmured in her ear, asking her something . . . where she lived . . . got away with her purse "Sorry", he said.

After that, the memories didn't make a lot of sense. The darkness, the sound of the window opening, the drapery fluttering in the wind.

And that touch, the velvet caress that promised so much more

"Sorry about your purse." The words echoed in her mind.

She searched her bedroom, the living room, even the kitchen. Not so much as a speck of dust out of place. Cosmetic jars were still neatly arranged on her dresser, the front door securely bolted. Everything just the way it had been when she left for work yesterday evening.

Except her purse.

I live on the third floor. How did I get in without my keys? Aimee fingered the chain lock on the front door.

What really happened last night?

There was only one way to find out, she decided.

* * * *

An hour later, she'd showered and begged a spare key from the building's superintendent. Sipping coffee from a styrofoam cup, she hastened through the crowds of Saturday afternoon shoppers to confront the park in the safety of daylight.

The sun was warm, despite the bite in the late October wind. Stoic hot dog vendors still manned each corner. Adults strode purposefully along while their children lingered behind to gaze longingly at the Halloween costumes in store windows.

Aimee slipped behind a wall of monolithic office buildings, intent on the tiny park they sheltered. She had to know, had to solve the riddle of what had actually happened last night.

Rounding the corner, she faced down her fear. There it was. A twenty-foot plot of grass sporting two park benches, a garbage can, and looking completely innocuous in the late afternoon sun.

Last night she'd come searching for a ghost and met instead an all too human threat.

Staring at the scene of the crime didn't offer any relevant clues. Day faded rapidly into evening. Colors dimmed to shades of gray as the sun released its hold on the earth. As the sun sank behind the tall fence of buildings, the air cooled uncomfortably. An icy wind snaked down her spine. Aimee turned to leave.

Shadow glided into darkness. In the alley ahead, something moved. She caught a flash of pale skin against a black trench coat as he slunk between pools of light.

Him. Had to be.

Cloaking herself in the darkness between the buildings, Aimee followed, resolutely fastening her eyes on the fleeing shape ahead.

He seemed to melt into the shadows, his body momentarily losing form, only to materialize again in the fading light. The alley soon pitched them back into the street.

With the fall of night, the bar crowd claimed the street in throngs of blue denim and black leather. Streetlights splashed the sidewalk in liquid gold. Clad in anonymous black, her phantom dissolved into the crowd and disappeared.

Aimee rubbed a hand across her eyes. I've been working too hard, she told herself. That's what it is. The stress of too much pressure and too little sleep. I'm imagining things.

The memory of that seductive, comforting voice lingered in the depths of her mind. Shaking her head in confusion, Aimee headed for the subway.

She'd go home, make herself a hot cup of tea, curl up with a good book. Tomorrow, she'd talk to the landlord about getting her lock changed.

Ahead, the subway poured forth an unending stream of Saturday night partiers. The chrome railing was cold beneath her ungloved hand. Aimee froze.

In the doorway of a trendy leather goods boutique on the far side of the street, she caught a glimpse of black on black.

Caught by the wind, his trench coat billowed out behind him like a pair of great wings. Under the coat he wore dark pants of fine wool and immaculately polished shoes. Glossy black hair cascaded over his shoulders, mingling with the darkness of his coat. Contrasted against the cuffs of his voluminous sleeves were slender hands of smooth alabaster.

In her stolen glimpses of him over the summer, Aimee had thought him bereft, destitute. His tormented eyes and thin frame allowed him to blend in with the street population. Yet now, illuminated by the light of the trendy boutique, his fine clothes revealed him to be anything but.

He paused in the entrance long enough to shift his purchase in its fancy bag under his arm. Fathomless dark eyes scanned the street, stopping abruptly as they fastened upon her. It was almost as though he knew she'd be there, so easily had he picked her out of the crowd.

For several long seconds, they stared at each other across the traffic, the phantom frozen in the doorway, and Aimee was motionless upon the subway stairs. A streetcar passed between them.

When she looked up, there was only the fluorescent lights of the boutique blazing out into the street.

"Wait!" Weaving through the traffic, Aimee scrambled for the far side of the street. He couldn't be far. She'd been staring at him only a few seconds ago.

Except for the lone clerk in an oh-so-tasteful suit, the store was empty. He hadn't gone back in then. A quick glance in either direction didn't place him among the crowds. A narrow laneway ran along side the shop. Aimee slipped inside.

She floundered in the unexpected blackness, groping for the wall to steady herself. Against the concrete came the scrape of claws. Aimee tripped, falling headlong into a mound of plastic garbage bags. With the sound of a flag unfurling, something very large passed over her.

Looking up, she saw the silhouette of a huge bird against the streetlight.

* * * *

By the time she reached her apartment building, Aimee had resolved to stay out of deserted parks and back alleys forever. And to request two weeks holiday at the shelter's earliest convenience.

The squat low-rise building sat quietly at the end of a residential street. Leaves of gold and crimson swirled around her ankles as she turned onto the walkway. With a sigh, she looked up at her window, illuminated from the glow of the lamp she always left on in the living room.

A pair of onyx eyes blinked back at her.

Aimee clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the gasp that escaped nonetheless. Perched on the narrow ledge outside her window was the gray and black flecked profile of an owl.

An owl in the city!

Eyes glittered like black jewels, regarding her with keen intelligence. The wind stirred the majestic bird's feathers. With a soft hiss, leaves drifted lazily to the ground.

Aimee.

The whisper caressed her mind, stirring again the inexplicable memory of feather-soft lips against hers before it was lost in the sigh of the leaves.

Those incredible eyes seemed to swim toward her as the huge bird leaned forward. For a moment, she was afraid it would topple from its precarious perch. Massive wings spread with calculated grace. It swooped low over her before rising in a sweeping arc against the night sky.

By the time she reached the front door, she'd convinced herself it was only one of those plastic owls set to scare off pigeons. She hadn't seen it fly. It was only a trick of the wind and an overactive imagination.

Stuffy warm air greeted her as she trudged across the lobby and leaned against the wall to wait for the elevator. As it opened on the third floor, she was laughing at the absurdity of tailing a stranger through the Queen Street hordes.

As if I can't think of better things to do on a Saturday night. But it was true. Her date book had been empty for the past six months, since her boyfriend, Tony, suggested they see other people.

So much for love in the big city. With a pang of regret, Aimee turned into the kitchen to put on the kettle for tea.

And stopped half way across the floor.

There in the center of the formica table was a fancy green bag with knotted wool handles. The name Leather International was scrawled across the paper in gold lettering.

Curiosity dragged her forward. She peered inside. Wrapped in tissue paper was a tan purse of butter-soft leather. On a parchment card was a message written with a blue fountain pen.

Sorry about your purse.

The note was scripted in a strong yet decorative hand that spoke of a more elegant and leisurely time. Aimee ran her hand over the smooth lambskin. The leather warmed beneath her touch.

Contrasting leather piping trimmed the purse's square shape. A fancy gold clasp fastened in the front. It was stylish, expensive looking. She could never have afforded such a thing. Oddly touched, she thought of the battered black duffel bag she'd lost.

Not only had her mysterious phantom saved her, he'd worried about what she'd lost, cared enough to want to replace it.

Cared. The word made her catch her breath. Watching over her during her work in the night city was a stranger who cared for her. Her own guardian angel.

Still pondering that thought, Aimee set the gift on her dresser. Leaving the hall light on, she cradled the cup of warm tea in her hands and collapsed gratefully against the thick comforter.

* * * *

An icy breeze brushed her hair against her cheek. Impatiently, she swatted at it. What on earth had possessed her to leave the window open on such a cold night? In the dreamy lethargy of sleep, she rose to shut it.

The hall lamp cast planes of light across the bedroom floor. Against the window, the shape of a man blocked the glow of the streetlights.

Breath caught in her throat. A scream died on her lips.

She should be afraid. The thought seemed very far away, shrouded in gauzy layers of sleep. She should . . . what?

He stepped into the room. Tendrils of mist roiled over the windowsill to cling to the drapery and carpet. Fascinated, she watched him glide toward her, shrinking the plot of carpet between them.

Had he moved? Had she?

Smooth ivory skin covered the angular planes of his face. A silk shirt was draped exquisitely over his broad shoulders. Black hair tumbled almost to his elbows, mingling with the darkness of his shirt. Aimee had never liked long hair on men, thought it looked effeminate. Yet on him, it was explicitly male.

And undeniably virile.

"Who are you?" The words seemed to catch in her throat.

Onyx eyes glittered in the stolen light from the street. He smiled down into her face.

"Tristan," he said in that voice of molten gold.

"Tristan," she repeated drowsily. His voice was like a long forgotten melody. Tomorrow she would wake and wonder at it. But tonight she was content merely to dream and to feel.

Lost in the sparkling depths of his eyes, tranquillity spread through her body. Here was comfort. Here was shelter. Fear dropped away from her to lie like the discarded comforter upon the bedroom floor.

So close. She reached out a hand to touch him, to satisfy herself he did have substance and wasn't just a mirage of the mist. Through the material of his shirt she felt a well-muscled arm. With a soft gasp, she pulled her hand away. A most vivid dream, she decided.

He brushed a lock of hair from her shoulder. His fingers trailed down her arm, setting off twinges of purest pleasure.

"Sweet Aimee. You of all people should know the streets are not safe at night."

"I don't understand," she whispered, sapphire eyes staring up at him wide with wonder.

"Always worried about others." His fingers caressed her cheek, then slipped behind to grasp a handful of her chestnut-brown hair. "Even the likes of me"

The last words trailed off into silence as if for some reason what he was caused him great pain.

Aimee looked up at him, sea-blue eyes wide with concern. "But I was worried about you, whether you'd be warm enough on such a cold night, if you had somewhere to sleep."

"It's been so long since someone spared a thought for me. Not since . . ."

Another sentence left uncompleted, as if there was much he would tell her yet had decided against it.

"But you needn't worry, dearest Aimee," he said suddenly, tracing the line of her chin with his thumb. "Finding a place to sleep is the least of my troubles."

"You don't look at all poor," she agreed, her eyes flitting over his fine, exquisite-fitting clothes. Nor was he at all thin, she added silently.

Full lips drew into a seductive smile. "I assure you I'm not. At least not in the monetary sense."

Aimee didn't understand, would have said so, but a more pressing question occurred to her. "So what were you doing out there on the streets all summer?"

"Just as you were doing. Guarding the less fortunate."

"Guarding them? Why? Against whom?"

"Not whom," he corrected gently, "what. And the answer to why is a very long and complicated matter."

It was a dream wasn't it? Time was hardly an issue. "I have time."

Eyes a shade off-black searched hers. "Perhaps I will tell you someday. But not tonight. I did not come here to talk of shadows and darkness."

His hands slid sinuously over her shoulders to clasp her against him. Aimee burrowed deeper into his warmth. It was hard to think of danger in the comfort of his arms. His tautly muscled body seethed with restrained strength. "What could be so terrible?"

"Some questions are best left unasked."

Aimee opened her mouth to ply him with another question. But he held her away from him and smiled down into her face. "Such serious talk for such a pleasant evening. The night is still young. Come, let me show you my city."

A blast of cold air. The room, her apartment building, dropped away beneath them, then spiralled off out of sight. Rising high into the velvet-black of the night sky. Multi-colored lights whirled about her in a delightful kaleidoscope.

Aimee blinked to find herself suddenly sitting on a stone bench, Tristan beside her.

With a little cry, she sprang away from him and gaped at the roof garden around them. Potted topiary leant an air of intimacy to clusters of

benches. Globe lamps on wrought-iron bases cast circles of pale light across the rooftop. Below them the city stretched out like a line of lights on a vast Christmas tree.

The magic of the night, Aimee mused, then wondered where that strange thought came from. As a child, she had gazed for hours at the city skyline, marvelling that the many-hued lights were like so many stars come to earth. Through her work in the years that followed, she had come to view the night as a time of loneliness and vulnerability.

But the warmth of Tristan's body enveloped her more surely than a cloak. Tonight she was neither of those things. Tonight she embarked on an extraordinary journey and was content to let it unfold.

She glanced up at him. The wind blew his hair out behind him, framing his luminous face against the dark sky. "Where am I?" she finally had the presence to ask.

"My favorite place."

"I'm dreaming," she said, drowsily. "Aren't I?"

"Oh yes," he murmured, his breath warm against the top of her hair.

"Dream lovely one. Isn't that what sustains us all, our dreams?"

She was about to answer him, when he rose gracefully to his feet and held out his hand for her to join him.

"Do you dance, Aimee?"

On the trellis nearby a faded rose bloomed tenaciously despite the cold. He plucked it and presented it to her with a cordial bow.

Surely in a dream one didn't have to worry about having two left feet, she thought joining him. But she stumbled on the first step.

"I'm afraid I never learned how."

He laughed then and swept her up into his arms. "I would be honored to be your teacher."

Under his careful tutelage, it seemed easy. His body melded to hers as they waltzed across the rooftop.

Constellations swirled above them and the city lights below. He lowered his mouth to explore her with satin kisses. With searing lips, he traced a line of fire down the slender column of her throat. Not content to stop there, he continued over her collarbone to nibble at her nape.

Aimee nuzzled deep into the warm hairs that escaped from the deep V of his shirt. With gentle hands, he tilted her face up to meet his once again.

The touch of his lips reached down into the depths of her soul, healing places she hadn't known were hurting. She was lost in the feel of him, lost in the infinitely sensuous movement of his body against hers.

"This has been wonderful," she murmured when he released her mouth. "You have been wonderful. When can we do this again?"

His breathtakingly handsome face clouded with pain.

"It has been wonderful," he said slowly. "But it cannot be between us, little one."

"Why?" she demanded, appalled. This was not the way she wanted the dream to end. "Why can't it be? Because of the things you won't tell me."

"That," he said, "and much, much more."

Tossed on the wind, his hair caressed her cheek. Eyes a shade off-black seemed to take up the sky. Then she was tumbling into their fathomless depths.

Falling again

Into the softness of down pillows and thick blankets.

"Sleep," he whispered, his lips moving against hers. "And forget."

* * * *

Strains of achingly sweet music receded into her dreams. Smiling, Aimee opened her eyes.

A familiar ceiling stared back at her from her familiar bedroom. So why did she have the distinct feeling she'd been somewhere else?

Somewhere infinitely pleasant . . . lights glittering all around her . . . the enticing press of a hard male body against hers. Silk-clad muscles rippling beneath her hands as he moved.

She inhaled deeply, savoring the scent of red roses. Instinctively, her hand went to the side of her head, knowing somehow before her fingers met softness what she would find.

The scarlet rose overflowed her palm. Aimee fingered the velvet petals, afraid that if she didn't touch it, the crimson flower would disappear as surely as the man who gave it to her.

Images caressed her memory, tantalizingly close. City lights swirling below her. Raven hair blowing over her shoulders. Eyes that became the sky. The rustle of powerful wings

Forget.

But she hadn't forgotten. Memories crystallized.

Tristan. The man with the woeful eyes and the breathtakingly handsome looks. Tristan, whose courtly manners and dulcet voice could melt the heart of a street-hardened case worker.

Finally, her phantom had a name. However, naming him did nothing to dispel the mystery surrounding him.

* * * *

Bruised clouds of violet-gray squashed the sunset. The threatening sky promised rain. According to the forecast, it would be an icy one. Aimee hunkered down into collar of her leather jacket. Regardless of the weather, she intended to scour Queen Street until she found the elusive Tristan.

The parkette was empty except for a disgruntled raccoon, who reluctantly left its perch on the garbage can when she approached. Vengeful eyes turned upon her, it lumbered off into the shadows and waited for her to leave.

Bar hoppers warmed themselves in trendy pubs, leaving the streets to those who had nowhere else to go. A discarded Coke can clattered down the empty sidewalk.

"Tall guy in black?" Gray took the coffee gratefully. "Haven't seen him for several days." He spread a piece of sleeping bag out on the hot air grate to offer Aimee a seat. Hawk-like eyes regarded her shrewdly. He wiped a grubby hand through his steely beard and grinned toothlessly. "Why you so interested?"

Aimee swatted him playfully. "You've got a dirty mind, Gray." She stood to leave.

"Ask Maggie," Gray offered. And grinned again.

Maggie slumbered underneath a veritable mountain of newspapers and plastic garbage bags. Sheltered from the wind in the doorway of a boarded-up building, she wasn't cheerful about being awakened. Even for the offer of a hot chocolate.

"Fellow with the pretty face?"

Aimee nodded.

"Always wears black?"

"That's the one."

Maggie took a cautious sip of hot chocolate. "Saw him last week, down by the old electric factory."

"Thanks Maggie."

"Not worried about the likes of him, are you? Man can take care of himself."

The streets aren't safe at night.

Aimee hurried across the abandoned parking lot. Beyond the sphere of the streetlights, the gravel was treacherous, full of broken bottles and rusty nails. One look, she promised herself. A quick tour of the perimeter. Hopefully, the rain would hold off that long.

Gravel shifted ahead in the dimness. Something even darker glided through the gloom.

She called out, "Tristan!"

The shadow froze.

"You should not have come here," he said, turning his face into the light from the distant street.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"You should leave at once. This place isn't safe."

"But" The brick wall threw her voice back at her. The space where Tristan had been standing was suddenly empty.

"Wait!" Aimee rushed into the shadows.

The doorway reared up out of nowhere. She crashed against it, flailing to keep her balance when it unexpectedly swung inward. The interior was unrelentingly black. Aimee thrust out a hand, relieved to find wall nearby. By touch alone she navigated forward. Straining her ears to make up for the lack of sight, she heard a soft tread, rising upward.

Stairs.

She turned toward the sound, groping her way until she found the splintered banister. Footsteps continued up into the darkness. The railing vibrated under her hand. Climbing blindly, Aimee followed.

A sprinkling of silver light dusted the upper floors. It took several moments for her to realize part of the roof was missing. Grateful for the illumination, she hurried on.

Damp air, numbingly cold, greeted her as she stepped onto the tar roof. Desperately, she cast about for Tristan's fleeing shape, but the roof was empty.

To her right came the scratch of claws.

"Tristan," she called, hoping desperately it was him.

Something very large alighted nearby. Stepping out of the shadows, Aimee turned toward it.

Eyes like black-opals stared back at her from the ledge at the edge of the roof. Dark, human-looking eyes.

Standing so close, it was impossible not to be awed by the size of the huge owl. Easily four feet tall, she didn't even want to guess at its wingspan. Through the dimness she could make out flecks of gray and black feathers. She knew without touching it that its coat was downy soft.

It froze there on the ledge, looking back at her with Tristan's eyes. The giant bird ruffled its wings, as if considering whether to take flight. Its chest heaved. She thought she heard it sigh.

Then the impossible happened.
Claws thickened into feet, its legs thickened, stretched. Wings melted into arms.
Aimee took a sharp step backward.
Feathers receded, its beak became a nose. Midnight hair tumbled over expanding shoulders. She watched in utter fascination as its face blurred, reshaped.
Then it was Tristan standing before her.
Sorrowful eyes regarded her thoughtfully.
"Is this the thing you couldn't tell me?"
He nodded, still watching her warily.
Aimee forced herself to take a step toward him. "Are you going to tell me now?"
Tristan turned away from her to look out into the night. "I suppose I have nothing to lose."
He made no sound as she approached, simply stared off into the menacing clouds that lined the horizon.
"Be careful," he said finally. "The roof isn't safe."
Cautiously, Aimee reached out a hand to touch his shoulder, half expecting to feel the softness of feathers beneath her fingers. Instead, her touch connected with muscular shoulders that felt most definitely human. She heard him suck in his breath. But instead of turning away, he pulled her into his arms.
He was wearing a different shirt, dark green in the pale light, loosely fitting. The wind caught at it, billowing it out around them.
"You told me to forget," she said into his chest. "But I didn't."
"No," Tristan said, regretfully. "You have a much stronger mind than I anticipated."
"Why did you come to me then, if you intended to wipe out my memory of you?"
He sighed, hugging her closer. "I couldn't help myself. From the first moment I saw you, chatting on the air vent with that old man, I loved you."
"Gray," she corrected. "That's what he calls himself."
"You have a kind heart."
"As do you, protecting people who can't protect themselves."
Tristan shook his head. "I came to understand the value of kindness far too late."
"Too late?"
"To save my soul."

"I don't understand"

"It's quite simple," he said holding her away from him. "I'm cursed."

That's ridiculous, the words were on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't say them. She'd just seen an owl turn into a man. The man who'd rescued her, courted her, haunted her dreams. The man she . . . loved.

"Do you believe in the power of curses, Aimee?" he asked softly.

"Right now I don't know what to believe." That at least was the truth.

"And do you still want to know?"

Aimee looked up into the hard planes of a face that was at once beautiful and fierce. The animal in him lurked so close beneath the surface, seething with restrained strength. She half expected him to leap from the rooftop, metamorphosing into a majestic bird as he fell. And by the tortured look on his face, she was certain he'd much rather that than share with her his darkest secret.

"Tell me." She rose to her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his.

His eyelashes brushed her face as his eyes drifted shut. He caressed her lips with his own, tenderly, regretfully. Gently, yet firmly, he pushed her away from him.

Tristan swallowed heavily. For a brief moment, he considered her, then as if suddenly coming to a decision, he said, "I was born over two hundred years ago to a merchant family."

Aimee opened her mouth to protest the impossibility of it, but he continued resolutely.

"My father had a knack for business, but he also had a knack for drink and gambling. He squandered his wealth. Our fine house, his ships, were claimed by debtors. The shame of it was the death of my mother. I soon found myself living in the streets.

"It was a harsh existence, but I was a bright youngster. While I had no property, I did have knowledge and plenty of wit and courage. I convinced an old colleague of my father's to take me as his apprentice."

He paused, waiting for her condemnation. But when she looked back at him with compassion, he resumed. "I learned quickly. Eventually, he made me his partner. When he died, I inherited the business I helped create."

"But that was good, wasn't it?" She didn't understand what could be so shameful about being a self-made man.

Tristan shook his head. "Blinded by my success, I forgot my humble roots. I forgot what it was to be hungry. In my arrogance, I began to look down upon those less fortunate than I."

"A human enough failing," Aimee said, grasping for something, anything, to wipe that look of anguish from his face.

"Perhaps," Tristan said. "Preoccupied with my own importance, I angered something that wasn't human."

Watching her carefully, he waited for her tacit approval to continue.

"The person who cursed you?"

He gestured to the roiling clouds on the horizon. "On a night such as this, an old woman came begging at my door. I could have given her a place by my hearth. It would have cost me nothing to let her sleep in the stables. But I didn't want to be reminded of my modest beginnings. I sent her away into the storm."

Tristan stared into the tumultuous sky. Thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. "As I went to close the door, she pointed her crooked finger at me. In my dreams, I can still hear her shrieking, Heart of beast, The night to roam, Never to face the light alone."

Eyes raw with pain beseeched hers for understanding.

"As the clock chimed midnight, I became as I am now."

"But that's"

"Impossible?" he supplied. "Ah, Aimee, but things happen every day that are . . . impossible."

"Then it was you outside my window." A statement, not a question.

"It wasn't a dream."

"No."

Alone to never face the light.

The phrase compelled her attention. Within the verse lay an important clue she was missing.

"Tristan"

He held up a hand to silence her, as though afraid if he didn't tell her that very minute, he might forever lose his nerve.

"You must understand, Aimee. It cannot be between us. Even if you could come to love the likes of me, I could never fully share your life." He smothered her protests and pressed on. "Once I believed I could undo the curse if I committed enough acts of kindness. But that turned out not to be the case. However, I found that thoughtfulness has its own way of easing the soul."

"Is that why you rescued me?" She had to know. "To save your soul?"

"I rescued you because you had already captured my heart. You touched me with your kindness, your concern for others. I loved you. I couldn't let them harm you."

Alone to never face the night. Alone.

All of a sudden, the curse's meaning sunk in. Within her was the power to undo the curse.

"But Tristan, don't you see . . . that's what the curse means. Alone you can't face the light. You're a creature of darkness, trapped within your own cold-heartedness. But if you had someone to love you, someone to show you the way back to the light, then perhaps the spell could be undone."

For a moment, Tristan seemed to consider her words. Then he shook his head, stepping back, dissolving into the shadows. "I love you too much, Aimee, to taint you with my evilness."

Held in check too long, the bloated clouds burst. Frigid rain began to fall in icy knives upon the roof.

"Tristan!"

Aimee fumbled in the darkness, reaching out for the space he no longer occupied. Wind shot a torrent of freezing rain into her face. Lightning sizzled nearby, lighting up the roof in a brilliant flash that showed her she was quite alone. She blinked, gone suddenly blind as her eyes attempted to compensate for the sudden glare. Beneath her feet, the tar was suddenly slick with moisture.

The roof seemed to rear up out of nowhere. Impact knocked the breath from her lungs. Helpless to stop her movement, she slid across the roof on her stomach.

A massive crack cut through the fury of the storm. Suddenly, there was only empty air where the roof had been only moments before. Aimee screamed, arms and legs wind-milling helplessly as she plummeted into darkness.

Horribly sharp claws tore through the leather of her jacket, wrenching her backwards and up. Powerful wings vibrated through the air around her. She jerked her head upwards to see two onyx eyes staring down at her. Beneath her the ground whirled sickeningly. She screamed again.

* * * *

Candlelight, translucent as watercolor, filtered through the fringe of her lashes. Aimee opened her eyes.

The room was aglow with a multitude of candles. They burned in bright rows on low tables and flowed in a brilliant flame across the mantle. The dancing flames of the myriad candles were hypnotic, comforting. She burrowed back into the warmth of the silk-satin duvet, content to succumb to the seductive call of sleep. Her eyelids flew open.

She was most definitely not at home. And the last thing she remembered was plummeting toward her death through the stormy sky.

Throwing off the heavy duvet, she sat up and studied her unfamiliar surroundings. The room she'd been sleeping in looked like a pictorial from Victoria magazine. Thick velvet drapes fringed with gold blocked out the dampness. The parlor was cluttered with an assortment of tables, each bearing its own doily and some sort of figurine or vase. Bouquets of cream-colored roses, dyed the color of antique lace by the candlelight, filled the air with their perfume. From somewhere beyond came strains of Vivaldi.

"I would have taken you home," said a familiar voice. "But I must confess, I would much rather keep you selfishly to myself."

Tristan leaned casually against the doorway of the crowded livingroom. A brandy snifter dangled from one hand, the other was thrust into the pocket of his pleated pants.

He left the doorway and crossed the parlor to sit beside her. Carefully, cherishingly, he pulled her up into his arms, holding her tenderly like a wounded child. The brandy was warm against her lips. It burned all the way down her throat, but its fire seemed to chase back the chill. Her hair was damp against her cheek. She looked down to find herself clothed in a silk shirt that was far too big to be her own.

"Where am I?"

"My home."

She looked around her, then back at him. "But I fell."

He hugged her protectively closer. "The renovations to the upper floors are not yet completed. The roof is the most treacherous."

"You caught me." Images were falling into place now, like pieces of a puzzle. She remembered the sizzle of lightning, the huge bird lit up against the night sky.

"I would never let any harm come to you."

He set the decanter down on the table beside them and nestled her head in the crook of his neck. Aimee rested her head against his shoulder. Whatever he was, it had ceased to matter.

"Promise you won't disappear again after you kiss me?"

He laughed, and she felt the vibration beneath her hand as she slipped it through the opening of his shirt to caress the soft hairs of his chest.

"I promise."

"Good," she said. And covered his mouth with hers.

She was not dreaming this time. Desire arched through her, keen and demanding. She intended to remember every minute of this night. With

tender kisses, she explored his forehead, dipping lower to nibble at the thickness of his eyebrows, before continuing down the arch of his nose to claim his mouth again.

Tristan lay back, crushing the comforter beneath him, content to assist her in her study of him. Her fingers worked on the buttons of his shirt, opening it to her searching lips.

Warm hands travelled upward under her shirt, stroking her, encouraging her, until the fabric grew too confining and he pulled it off over her head and tossed it aside. His gaze lingered on her, warm and admiring. Then he pulled her closer to take the taut peak of one breast into his mouth.

Aimee moaned, arching backward as his lips moved to tease the other. Frantic hands fumbled with his belt, until, chuckling, he assisted her by easing them over his hips and onto the floor.

Her eyes drank in the length of him, the animal strength beneath smooth skin. With liquid grace he turned and gathered her under him. Satin hair fell down around her in a warm cascade. She felt him, hard against her thigh, yearning with desperation to match her own.

"Love me," she whispered against his lips. And with a gentle yet purposeful thrust, he obliged her.

He brought her soaring to the summit of ecstasy, then plunged with her down into soft sighs and drowsy caresses.

Together, they curled up beneath the duvet, warmed by each other, as the rain drilled angry nails at the windows outside.

* * * *

The sun cast spears of light around the edges of the drapery. Aimee opened her eyes, the events of the past night startling clear in her mind for the first time in three days. She smiled, stretching languidly against Tristan's warmth beside her.

A band of light cut across of his face. His eyes opened cautiously. Wonderingly, he turned his face into the light.

Like a wary animal, he crept hesitatingly forward, until he was showered in its golden glow. In fascination, he stared at the liquid light covering his hands.

Then, with a joyful laugh that seemed to come from the roots of his being, he threw open the drapes and turned to face her.

Bewildered, Aimee watched his movements. Suddenly, the significance of his simple action grasped her.

Together, they were facing the sunlight.

Awed, she joined him in the shaft of glittering light.

He ran his hands through her hair, wondering at the auburn highlights. His fingers stroked her cheek, as if rediscovering her, assuring himself that the moment was indeed real.

"Tristan, what is it?"

"The sunlight," he whispered, as if saying it aloud might make the miracle disappear.

"The curse . . . do you think it's gone?"

Tristan gave a shaky laugh. "I don't know."

"Try changing," she suggested, afraid even to hope.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes. Aimee watched his features change to smooth marble as he composed himself. She realized suddenly she was holding her breath and let it go with a deep sigh. Tristan opened his eyes.

"I can't . . . seem to bring about the metamorphosis."

"This is good, right?"

"Good? It's fantastic," he said, the first signs of optimism creeping into his smile. "You've saved me, Aimee. With your love, you helped me rediscover the man within the beast." He pulled her tightly against him and kissed her soundly.

"Do you really think it's possible?"

"I'm certain of it." Sweeping her off her feet, he twirled her across the livingroom, as he had on the rooftop.

"Come on," he said, putting her down suddenly.

"Where are we going?"

Tristan looked down into blue eyes that sparkled like jewels in the morning light. "I intend to walk with the woman I love into the dawn."