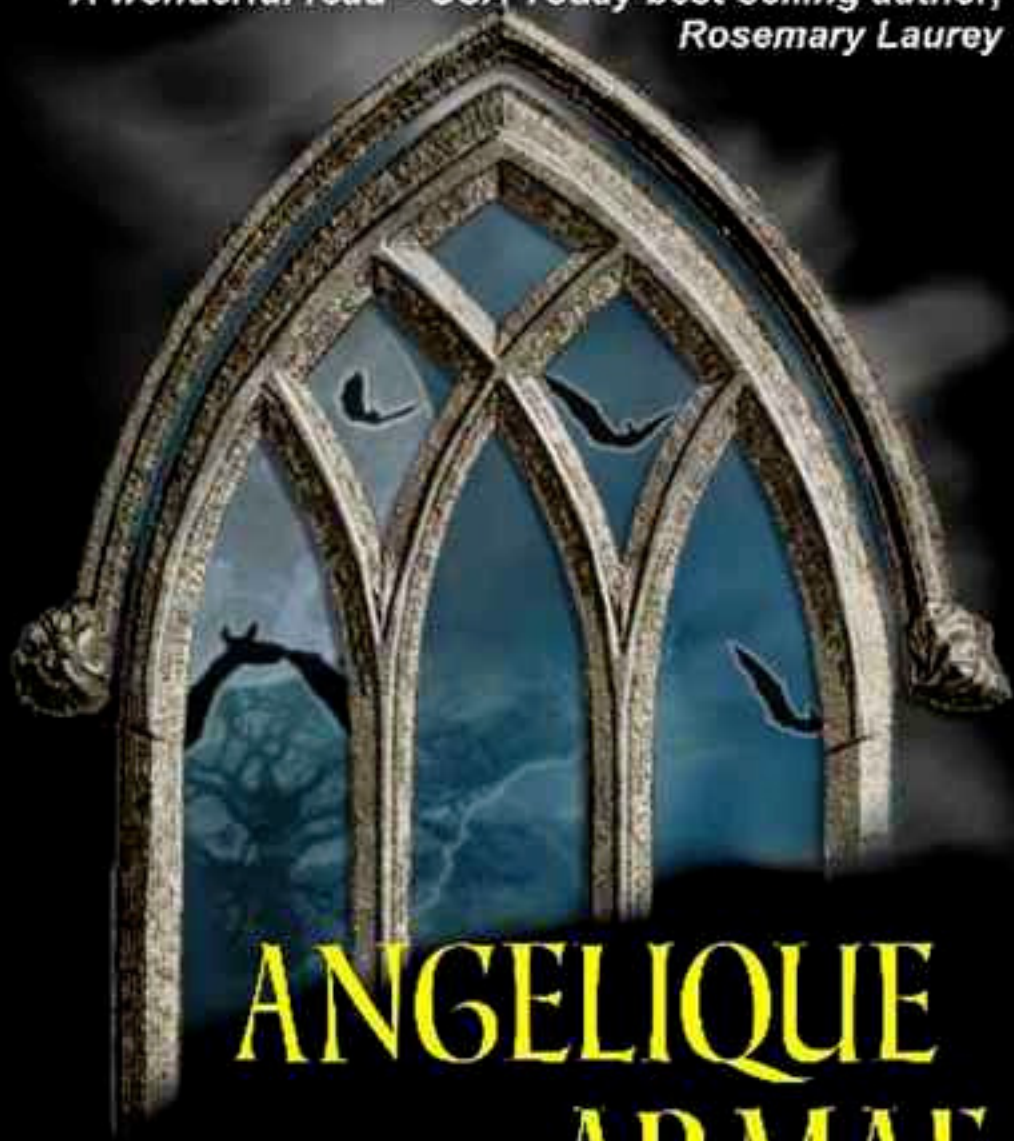


*DEAD
WALKERS:* **THE
PROTECTORATE**

*"A wonderful read" - USA Today best-selling author,
Rosemary Laurey*



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Dead Walkers: The Protectorate [Dead Walkers Series Book One]
by Angelique Armae

DEAD WALKERS: THE PROTECTORATE

By

Angelique Armae

Prologue

The Protectorate encampment outside East Angliae,
Roman Britain

"Save the girl..."

The words echoed in Donovan Bramwell's head until he thought of nothing else. If only his father had revealed to him more detail. If only he knew who he was looking for.

If only...

The unending questions tortured him. Haunted his days and tormented his nights. But with nothing more than a broken relic hanging from a piece of knotted cloth, Donovan had little to go by in his search for the mysterious girl his people had headed out to protect.

For the last fortnight he had roamed through strange lands trying to return to his grandfather's camp. The task hadn't been an easy one. First, he had spent several days trying to escape the priest charged with seeing to his protection, and then he had to make his way back to the Protectorate camp by hiding from Roman barbarians pillaging their way through Britain's provinces. None of his fellow Dead Walkers—humans and other immortals who walked on the dark side of life—could have managed to escape as he had. And now, by the devastatingly haunting sight lying before him, all he could think of were his father's last words to him.

"Should we fail, it will be up to you to save the girl..."

Donovan wandered through the encampment searching for his father and grandfather, the two men responsible for driving the task at hand into his brain. If only they had allowed him to remain with the camp and not sent him off to

a church for safekeeping. He was ten and five—a man—for the gods' sakes. He didn't need to be kept from war like a child, secured from the evils of the world.

Staring at the devastation surrounding him, Donovan's heart ached. He could have helped his people.

For more than a month now, he had heard the council, both mortals and vampires alike, speak of a pending invasion by the Romans. The Protectorate, from what Donovan had surmised, had set off on a mission to save a royal Celt, a girl born to both vampire and mortal worlds. But by the looks of things, his people hadn't been successful. And now it was up to him to carry out a task that an entire force of warriors had been stopped from doing.

Everywhere he turned Donovan found nothing but charred tents and decapitated bodies. Long wooden stakes secured most of the corpses to the muddy earth. Others were brutally beaten and riddled with arrows. The smell of burning flesh churned his stomach. He easily deciphered vampire from human.

So did the enemy.

The thought struck fear into his soul. These Romans must have known whom they were dealing with when they invaded the camp. The oath of secrecy within the Protectorate had been broken, Donovan thought. If Caesar had known a unified society of vampires and mortals existed in the Isles, he also had to know subdivisions of the group existed throughout the Empire. A chill ran down his spine as the realization of the horrid notion settled in his mind. There were Dead Walkers everywhere. But until now, the Protectorate

had managed to keep the vampyric wars to a minimum, keeping the evil Dead Walkers well within reach so that no major attacks outside their own realm could take place. Obviously, the Protectorate had misjudged its stronghold.

A strong grasp locked around his ankle.

Donovan stumbled, his hands flailing out in front of him. Mud smacked his lips. A Vampyric aura clawed at his soul, emitting from the fingers squeezing around his leg.

He gathered his strength and pushed his arms against the slippery mud, rising to his knees and staring at the ground below.

A bloodied body lay next to him, huddled in a muddy cocoon.

Donovan examined the man's face. But it did him little good. The poor soul had been beaten to a bloody pulp, leaving his bones broken, his features unrecognizable.

The man moved his raw lips in slow, tedious motions. From an opened mouth came no words. The man flexed his hand a second time.

Donovan sensed the man wanted to say something to him, mayhap reveal his dying wish. He leaned in close, placing his ear near the injured man's mouth.

"Vastos ... Icenì..."

He had never heard such names. The man's words made little sense to him.

"Go ... away. Return ... to ... Eire."

The man loosened his grip, but he kept his fingers wrapped lightly around Donovan's ankle. He said nothing more.

Donovan pulled away, and then turned back to face the man. Something didn't make sense to him. The man gave off the aura of vampire, not mortal. But he still had his head. He also hadn't been staked. Why would one vampire be left with his heart intact, when all the others had been removed?

Donovan moved his leg, trying to free it from the dying man's grip, but the bloodied warrior refused to let go. The overwhelming sense of protection, followed by an immense feeling of possessiveness, washed over Donovan's soul. The man clung to him for dear life.

Donovan searched the man's face one more time. Something had to be recognizable. Then he saw it, four small trickles of blood oozing from the man's neck.

He recognized the mark on the instant. *Double puncture wounds*. The man had been bitten in the ancient Vampyric way, and apparently so after he'd been beaten. He had also been drained of most of his blood.

In all his fifteen years, Donovan thought, he'd never seen such madness, such barbarianism. This war now engaged vampire against vampire. The thought sickened him. But why leave this particular Vampyric soul with his head and his heart intact?

The man relaxed his fingers.

Donovan welcomed the opportunity to move away. He rose to his feet and looked down upon the dying vampire. Whoever had committed this act did so on purpose. The enemy wanted this specific vampire to die from bleeding, a death most painful to a vampire. Once a double bite was complete, nothing could be done to aid the victim. Not even the gods

could interfere. He'd die a slow, painful death, two times over. One would kill off his mortal body, the second death his Vampyric soul.

The thought unsettled Donovan more now than when he had first discovered the puncture wounds. He bowed his head and prayed a silent prayer to the gods. No soul should have had to endure such agony. He couldn't even begin to imagine what the man must have witnessed on this battlefield. Donovan wondered what it would feel like to be left so alone, knowing death would soon claim your soul. If only he could understand the man's dying words. A pang of regret gnawed at his soul.

Then, without warning, a fiery pain struck his shoulder, crashing down upon his flesh and cutting to the bone. On the instant, Donovan spun on his heel and drew his sword.

A man dressed in a black cloak stood before him, the hood of his cape covering his eyes. "So fine an ending to so fine a day," the stranger said.

Donovan pushed the razor sharp edge of his sword closer to the man's neck.

"A wound there would do me little harm."

Shock washed over him like a tidal wave. The entity standing across from him gave off no Vampyric aura, no telltale signs of his soul's hellish curse. Donovan didn't waver. At present, it didn't matter to him who he was facing. It wasn't the first time he had battled a vampire, and if he had anything to do with it, he'd survive this fight and live to face more. "Who are you and what have you done to my people?"

"Your people?" The vampire before him raised one of his gauntlet-covered hands, pushed the sword from his neck and pointed a glove-covered finger down at the dying soul lying upon the ground. "The last I checked," he said. "This group of worthless souls belonged to his father."

Donovan froze. *Impossible. The dying man couldn't be his father.* "You lie." He didn't know what else to say. A son should have recognized his own father, even among such physical chaos. How could he have not known?

The vampire took a step forward. "I admit to many sins, but in all my days, I have never once lied. I've no need to."

Donovan doubted that. He took a deep breath, his lungs suddenly gasping for air. *The girl ...* Thoughts of the young Celt came flooding back to him. If the body upon the ground truly was that of his father, then the mission had even more meaning. He reached for the silver stake hidden under his tunic. During his vampyric training, he'd learned how easy one could make the body become a virtual weapons caddy. "Back away or I will kill you."

The vampire smirked. "Not even the gods could kill me."

"Where is Angus Bramwell?"

"The Lord Protector escaped," the cloaked vampire said. "He left like a coward, fleeing over that hill." He pointed to the land behind where Donovan stood. "Not a loyal leader, in my opinion."

His father had been abandoned. Pain hammered Donovan's heart. He should have been here for his father, fighting side by side, attacking the enemy. Donovan wanted to scream, to cry out, rant, rage.... But he refused to show such weakness

in front of his enemy. He'd focus on the task at hand and mourn his loss later. He needed his every essence of will power to avenge his father's death. He would have his revenge and he would have it no matter what.

Donovan leaped forward. He aimed the stake for the vampire's chest, hitting the heart dead center.

He bounced back, the force of his thrust too great for his own weight.

A loud hiss splintered the dead air. A flash of white blurred from beneath the vampire's hood.

Fangs ... He refused to be bitten. Donovan lunged for the vampire's neck and flicked a small dagger from under the wrist of his tunic sleeve. He aimed for the jugular this time, hoping the man's neck would be more pliable than his chest.

The vampire's hood fell back.

Donovan gasped. His hands remained poised at the vampire's neck, an invisible force keeping him from moving the dagger any further. The man's eyes were all too familiar to him. They were identical to his father's ... to his grandfather's ... to his own. He backed away, stunned and confused, disbelief coursing through every last nerve in his body.

"Yes," the vampire hissed. "You and I are one and the same."

He shook his head, trying to dispel the shocking notion. Not only had the vampire read his mind, but the creature also had revealed information he found difficult to fathom.

"Impossible."

The vampire shrugged, and then backed away. He clawed at the stake protruding from his heart and removed it with a single tug, tossing the blood-soaked metal to the ground in annoyance. He hissed a second time, and then lifted his head. He stared Donovan square in the eyes, his beady red orbs now flaming with anger.

"Tell me, Donovan," the vampire said. "Do you welcome the odd sensation of being a quasi as opposed to being a full-fledged vampire?"

Donovan didn't answer. He also decided not to think too much. The vampire before him knew his name, read his thoughts. The sense of being in dangerous territory overwhelmed him.

"I can take away the pain of slow growth, the pain that boils in the blood of one who teeters on the brink of both Vampyric and mortal worlds. I can take it all away and grace you with full Vampyric powers." He reached out an open hand, welcoming Donovan to step closer.

"How do you know of the quasi existence?"

The enemy offered a sly laugh. "I, too, was bitten while within my mother's womb for the sole purpose of being born a quasi. But the gods interfered, robbing my soul of life before I was born. The powers of darkness then came to my mother's aid and gave me back that which had so wrongly been taken away. I am now a full-fledged vampire with more powers than any other in existence. No other Dead Walker can match my strength."

He didn't believe such nonsense. The gods didn't sin and they didn't make mistakes. Only mortals and others born to this world erred in judgment.

A rustle in the nearby trees caught Donovan's attention. The essence of fear, emitting from a mortal soul, pricked his nerves.

The vampire slowly turned his head toward the forested land adjacent to the camp, his eyes suddenly widening, focused on something unseen in the distance.

The girl! Donovan knew in the deepest depths of his heart, the vampire recognized the same soul that he did. His father's words echoed in his head once more, sending a chill down Donovan's spine. He needed to do something, anything. He wracked his brain for an answer, trying desperately to think of a way to distract the vampire from the girl in the forest. He dropped his dagger. The clanging sound of its metal blade hitting against a broken shield on the ground caused the vampire to turn back to face him.

"I know your thoughts, Donovan. Therefore I know your plans. You are a fool to risk your life for another."

Donovan didn't answer. He took one step backward, then another, and yet another.

"You can't escape me."

Maybe not, but at least you won't get the girl. Donovan spun about and ran through the charred camp. His heart raced, and his breathing was heavy. He scanned the area with his preternatural abilities and found only one possible means of escape—an embankment at the edge of the hill.

Donovan ran as fast as his body allowed. Sliding over mud and decay, his feet skidded and stomped. He refused to stop until the girl at least had a chance to escape the vampire now in his shadow.

As he dove over an embankment, his heart pace slowed and his breathing calmed. He swallowed hard. He no longer had control of his body. The skin upon his neck tore with the puncture of two fangs sinking deep into his veins. He hadn't even realized the vampire had snagged him. His thoughts swirled into one blur. *Father ... grandfather ... the girl ...* He continued to fall into a deep abyss of confusion until he felt nothing but the encompassing mass of darkness.

"We found a girl, my lord," a deep voice echoed from somewhere in the distance.

I have failed, Father, Donovan thought as his body went limp, his mind swirling in heavy fog.

The vampire at his neck took one last drink of his blood and withdrew his fangs. Despite the confusion reeling through his mind, Donovan remained aware of the vampire lingering over him. He swore he heard the creature curse, then spit. But before he could decipher his enemy's words, the gaping holes torn into his flesh began to burn. As the night air blanketed his skin, a raging heat engulfed his blood. He tried to move, but his limbs were powerless. The vampire's unexpected act of pulling away confused Donovan even further. He wasn't going to die. His enemy wasn't going to kill him.

A moment later, ice-cold flesh brushed against his lips. A metallic essence drenched his tongue as an uncontrollable

desire to drink overcame him. Donovan fought the urge to feed. Yet, despite his best efforts, he swallowed hard, taking in all that the vampire offered him and then some. As he swallowed, he felt the outer edge of his soul slip away. Panic rose inside Donovan. Despite his confusion he struggled against the attacking vampire and pushed away. He fell back, drained of all energy.

The burning sensation that seared his neck, flared up again.

"Vastos has returned," the vampire lapping at his neck, whispered. "Welcome to my dark world."

Chapter One

Dublin, Ireland—1815

The earthy smell of the dank catacombs teased his nostrils and the cold air chilled him to the bone. But Donovan wouldn't have had it any other way. Life was starting to bore him as of late, and the peaceful existence of the catacombs gave him a bit of solace, even if it was only temporary.

He leaned back against the stone sarcophagus, his favorite brandy snifter resting in his hand. He twirled the glass between his fingers and watched in silent awe as the swirl of caramel colored liquor danced in a circulating motion. He raised the glass to his lips and downed a sufficient gulp of the drink. The potent liquor went down easy, helping to wash away his sins of the past. If only his conscience was as easy to absolve. He relished the fiery feel of brandy burning its way from his throat to his stomach. It wiped away all the tension, all the worries, and most importantly, all the pain. Donovan raised the glass to his lips a second time and finished off the drink.

From out of the shadows, the form of a man appeared. "My lord," he said. "Magnus McKei requests your presence in his office before sunrise."

Donovan groaned. "Why do you never bring me good news, Simpson? Why is it always some dratted information that makes me shiver?" He hated having to confer with his grandfather's solicitor. The only time the man ever called on him was to either badger on endlessly about some ancient

Vampyric rule, a stray Dead Walker, or to insist he improve his ties with the Protectorate organization. Three things he hated most. Three things he presently cared not to deal with.

Donovan rose to his feet. "Well, I suppose it has been some time since Magnus last requested my presence in his office, so I should have expected this. But somehow, no matter how much I know I will never escape the man, I still haven't come to terms with the situation."

The valet reached for Donovan's empty brandy snifter. "The Protectorate is in your blood, sir. I fear you will never be able to fully sever such ties."

If only Simpson knew how true his words were, Donovan thought.

"I have taken the liberty of having Higgins bring round the phaeton, my lord. Your ride awaits at the front."

Simpson disappeared back into the shadows.

Donovan turned to face the sarcophagus. Inside a similar marble tomb at his beloved castle Dun Sidhe lay his only reason for still living—his father's broken body. He had failed the man when he was ten and five. And not just by failing to save the girl his father had entrusted to his care, but by also failing to save his own blood. The dark lord had bitten him, tainting him with the evil Upyran essence. He wondered how long it would be before his soul took on his enemy's cause. For all he knew, he was now his own people's worst enemy. And never would he allow his soul to destroy the Protectorate. He had yet to find a way to regain his honor and purge his blood from the evil that now twisted it. Until then, Donovan feared, his father would never truly rest.

* * * *

Iceni ran the pad of her thumb over the relic hanging around her neck. The smooth contours of the ancient amulet forced her to recall her parents' brutal murders and reminded her of the grave importance of the task at hand. She needed to get to Donovan Bramwell before it was too late, before Vastos had claimed the remainder of her peoples' powers.

Rumor among her nomadic vampire allies had been that the dark lord Vastos had returned from the Upyran realm to raise havoc in man's world and was once again up to no good. Now was her chance to avenge her parents' deaths, to take back the lost section of the Ceni relic and make Vastos pay for his unspeakable crimes against her fallen tribe. But she could not fight the evil lord on her own. She'd tried to do so several times in the past and had failed miserably on each account. Donovan Bramwell was her only hope. Every vampire she knew spoke of the royal Celt with great fervor. He was the man capable of getting any job done. He was heir to the legendary Vampyric throne, the future Lord Protector of all Dead Walkers.

Iceni took a deep breath and prayed a silent prayer to the ancient gods. She'd waited in the shadows, watching Donovan's townhouse for more than an hour now. She had repeated the same task every night for the last fortnight. Hiding in the trees and making mental notes of the man's traveling habits—when he left for his club, when he left for a ride to nowhere, when he returned. Even when he slept and when he woke. But tonight had been different. Donovan

hadn't emerged from his home as he usually did after sundown.

A knot twisted in the core of Icení's stomach. The man had to eventually come out. He simply had to, for tonight she had made up her mind to finally go through with her plans of breaking into his house and forcing him to hear her plight.

From her spying, Icení had learned that Donovan kept to as much a mortal life on the outside as was possible. He mingled with his mortal peers and lived the lifestyle of a proper gentleman, befitting his wealth and his titles. Never once did he entertain the vampire in public. Convincing such a man to take on her cause wasn't going to be an easy feat. But fate left her no other options. She needed Donovan Bramwell's help in her fight against Vastos. And she didn't care what she would have to do to get it, even if that included committing a crime and seducing the future vampire king into helping her.

Icení swallowed hard and headed toward the house. A final survey of the surroundings would be best before making her move. She searched every window and every door, even the areas around the chimneys. Somewhere, she prayed, there had to be an unlocked portal or an open window. Mayhap even a crack in a wall. In bat form, she needed only a small space, the slightest of openings, and she could slip with ease into the house.

The sound of a latch unlocking echoed in the night air. The front door opened.

Icení stepped back, hiding in the shadows of a tall tree. Her heart beat wildly, her pulse erratic.

Donovan emerged from the house and stepped up into a waiting phaeton. The small carriage pulled out of the short drive and faded into the busy Dublin Street.

Iceni knew she didn't have much time before sunrise and Donovan's return. She dashed between two open gates and continued her final search of the outside of the house. Somehow she would get in, and when she did, there would be no turning back.

Chapter Two

Donovan took the stairs two at a time and headed up to the fourth floor, hoping to finish his business with Magnus McKei before sunrise. Why his grandfather's solicitor chose an office four stories above street level, a place closer to the sun, he'd never understand. For the life of him, he would never figure out what made Magnus tick. For a quasi-vampire, McKei certainly had some odd traits.

At the top landing, Donovan froze. He studied the area with a keen perception, allowing his preternatural abilities to take over. A single flash of waving red shadow illuminated his sight. *Only one soul.* He shut his eyes and chided himself. He really needed to stop being so wary of everyone and everything. The center of Dublin wasn't East Angliae, he reminded himself. And Magnus McKei wasn't the dark lord Vastos.

Donovan took a deep breath and reopened his eyes. He adjusted his sight to normal, mortal vision, and glanced about the corridor searching for the entrance to Magnus's office. The vampire solicitor was famous for never settling in one place for more than he needed to be. And the man's latest choice of offices didn't sit well with Donovan. He hated being in unfamiliar territory. Several white doors fitted with small brass name plaques lined the hall on either side of the stairway. An ornate banister finished off the otherwise stark surroundings. Only the red patterned carpet gave the area a

semi-warm feeling. Save for the catacombs, Donovan didn't like being in places so cold to the heart.

A surge of Vampyric energy touched his soul. Donovan scanned the narrow corridor and found the one door that stood out from the rest. Magnus said to look for the painted door. What the man failed to say was that the door was painted red ... blood red, to be precise. A rather obnoxious choice for a vampire. Donovan turned to his left and headed toward the end of the hallway. He stopped at the entry to Solicitor McKei's office and took another deep breath. He rapped upon the door twice with a fisted hand.

No answer.

He'd waited long enough.

Donovan turned around and headed back down the hall.

A lock clicked, sending a slight cracking noise through the air.

"You still haven't changed, have you?"

Donovan identified Magnus's voice and cursed to himself. Stopping in mid-stride, he turned back around and faced Magnus head on. "Judging from the tone of your voice, I'd guess not, Mr. McKei."

"Please, won't you come inside?" Magnus motioned with his hand, gesturing toward the open door.

Donovan frowned but consented. *Better to be done with it.*

He passed Magnus and entered the office.

McKei closed the door behind them and flicked the small lock shut. He pulled out a leather-covered chair for Donovan and then took his own seat behind the desk.

"The quasi existence seems to agree with you, Donovan," Magnus said. "You don't look a day over thirty."

He didn't look it, but he certainly felt it. "I've no time for small talk, Magnus. Why did you call me here?"

Magnus placed his arms upon the desk and leaned forward. "Your grandfather has been turned."

The news wasn't what he had expected to hear. The ancient quasi-vampire lord had finally been brought across to the world of the full-fledged vampire. "Who committed the deed?"

"I was not present at the time."

"I trust he's been given a proper resting place until his soul adjusts?"

Magnus nodded.

"Where?"

"An undisclosed location."

Donovan didn't like the sound of that. "Tell me the place, Magnus."

"Your grandfather was a Lord Protector, a king of the ancient kind. His turning is very significant to the Protectorate." Magnus paused. A veil of caution fanned his pale, thin face. Donovan detected uneasiness in the man. "I am not privy to reveal the location."

He swore a silent oath. "Cut to the chase, Magnus. How does this affect me?"

"You are now the new Lord Protector. The Protectorate is in your hands."

He said nothing, a whirlwind of mixed emotions twisting in his soul. Donovan rose from his chair. Crossing the room, he

paced the floor. As his vision swept the room, in sync with his back and forth pacing, the deep red walls of Magnus's office blurred with the colors of the patterned carpet at his feet. The room seemed to be closing in on him. He couldn't lead the Protectorate. It wasn't possible. A burning sensation seared his neck. *Vastos ... The bite...*

He stopped mid-stride. "And if I decline the kingship?"

"You can't," Magnus said. "There is no law for abdication in our realm. The only way out for a Lord Protector is to be turned."

He didn't need this just now. He couldn't save a single girl, how could he protect the entire realm of Itycan vampires and their allies? "The Protectorate has done well enough without my presence all these years. I hardly think they need me now."

Magnus sat back in his chair. A pensive look crossed his face.

Donovan sensed the ancient vampire probing his mind. He shot him an angry glare. "Stay out of my head. It's a very dangerous place to be. Trust me, I know firsthand."

Magnus backed down instantly. "The Protectorate needs you for numerous reasons. The first of those being Vastos has returned."

The news unsettled him. "Are you positive?"

"Yes," Magnus answered. He opened a drawer to his desk and withdrew a small, gold trinket in the shape of an X. He tossed the item onto his desk. "Vastos pays his servants, mainly stray Dead Walkers, in gold pieces bearing his own mark, an X stamped with a V for Vastos. Over the past

fortnight, various members of the Protectorate, both mortals and vampires, have turned in several of these pieces."

Donovan felt his heart skip a beat in alarm. He wasn't ready to face Vastos again. "What are the other reasons?"

"The ancient prophecies."

Donovan only remembered bits and pieces of the old Vampyric writings. "Surely, a man of your intelligence doesn't put much belief in the ancient scrolls."

"I've studied them over the years. And while I don't agree with everything written, I do believe in the savior who will come and unite both kingdoms as one realm."

Donovan returned to his seat. "My grandfather hailed from the Itycan bloodline. The Upyran vampire world has been at war with the Itycan's for almost two millennia. Why would a savior be born now?"

"Rumor has it this soul was born back in the days of old but is only now coming into its own."

Donovan eyed Magnus with caution. He searched the man's face, looking for something, anything, that would alert him to a lie. He found nothing. "What of this soul?"

"He contains within his veins the blood of both kingdoms."

Donovan let out a deep breath and slouched back in his chair. Now he had two enemies to worry about. He raked a hand through his hair and took a moment to gather his thoughts. "If the Protectorate can fight Vastos, then they can fight any other being."

"They need a leader to guide them."

A leader who won't fail them, Donovan thought.

"Donovan, back during the days of East Angliae, there was a girl. A royal Celt who had been born to a mortal mother and a Vampyric father allied to the Upyrans. The girl's soul was saved because of her ties to the mortal world through her mother's blood. We, the Protectorate, had hoped for a union between you and this girl. But then Vastos interfered."

"Yes, I know," Donovan answered. "You concentrated on the mortal Romans, never knowing Caesar had been aware of the Protectorate's existence."

Magnus nodded his head. "We made a grave mistake, and we've paid for it dearly."

He didn't trust himself to comment on that note. Anger from the past still weighed heavy within his heart. An angry grudge he feared he could never forgive.

"You must lead the Protectorate."

"Or what, Magnus?"

The solicitor's bony fingers searched a stack of papers sitting on his desk and pulled out a yellowed leaf of parchment. "The terms of your grandfather's will are very specific, my lord." Leaning across the desk, he dropped the document and pushed it toward Donovan. Then he sat back straight in his chair, his back firmly planted against the tufted leather, and his intense gaze hovered over a pair of spectacles perched at the edge of his nose.

Donovan wondered why the man still relied on his less than perfect mortal vision rather than using his vampyric sight. He surmised old habits were hard to break, and considering Magnus McKei was a stickler for refusing change, he imagined the man was a bit more than merely attached to

his old spectacles. If only his glasses could help him see what was best for the Protectorate.

"You must take up residence at Bramwell Abbey within forty-eight hours of this reading, or you will forfeit your rights to the entire Bramwell estate, including your beloved Dun Sidhe."

Donovan folded his arms across his chest and offered his solicitor nothing more than a silent stare. He'd never give up Dun Sidhe. It was the one place his soul sought solace. It was where he'd buried his father's broken body. "What you propose is preposterous."

"'Tis not my will."

"No," Donovan said. "'Tis not. But your influence upon it, I've no doubt, was great." He cursed to himself and then let out a deep breath. He had no plans to ever set foot in the retched Bramwell Abbey again, even if it meant losing his bloody fortune. He'd rather rot in hell than take up residence in a building that held nothing but bad memories.

"Your grandfather was no fool," Magnus said, his voice stern. "If you intend to keep what you already consider to be your own estate, then you must abide by the terms of his will."

"Truly you jest," Donovan said with a laugh.

The man eyed him with a serious stare. "I'm afraid, not. Dun Sidhe is part of Bramwell Abbey. If you chose to forfeit your right to the estate, the castle goes as well."

"I understood the castle to be my birthright."

"It is," the solicitor said. "But not in the way you believe it to be. Bramwell Abbey is your birthright and Dun Sidhe is part of that estate."

Donovan pinched the bridge of his nose. The skin between his forefinger and thumb tingled—it was almost sunrise. He hated mornings. "I need time before giving you an answer."

"Very well. But you only have forty-eight hours."

Forty-eight hours would be more than enough to move his father's body to another resting place. Then he'd be free of the Protectorate once and for all. Donovan rose from his chair and reached into his jacket pocket, withdrawing a pair of dark-tinted spectacles. He put them on before heading toward the door. "I will tell you, Magnus. At present, I am not all that concerned with leading our bloody realm. I will have to find good reason to accept my birthright."

The solicitor reached out and firmly grabbed hold of Donovan's arm. "You know not what you say, my lord." His words trailed to a whisper. "This is an ancient line. Your own blood ... the sake of the world ... everything is tied together. You are the Protectorate, sir. If you don't take your rightful place as its king, the line dies. An ancient dynasty thousands of years in the making dies. And..." He paused.

"And what, Magnus? I die too?" Donovan smiled a sly grin. "Then in death may I be free. So be it."

Magnus stared at him. A dark, sinister look crossed the man's face. "You have no idea what you are about, do you?"

The man was right, Donovan thought. He'd give him that much. In truth he knew very little about the blood that ruled his soul, his world. "I fear my grandfather was not the loving,

dotting sort of chap. He told me very little of my heritage. And over the years, what I did learn I made a point to forget. Today, I am far from being anything like a true Bramwell."

"Eventually, the vampire within will win. You can't fight it forever."

No, Donovan thought, he couldn't fight the madness forever. But he had no intention of giving into it just yet. He'd watched his father die, and then he'd learned the man was abandoned in his greatest time of need. After that, he lost all respect for the Bramwell way of life.

"Your grandfather did you a great service," Magnus said.

He hated when a fellow vampire read his mind. "I doubt you knew the real Angus Bramwell, Mr. McKei."

"Away with the formalities, my lord," Magnus said. "Let us talk vampire to vampire."

"Do not call me that." Donovan clenched his teeth. He wasn't vampire, he was branded, nothing more. His immortal soul was merely marked as belonging to the Bramwell line. He was a quasi. He teetered on the brink between both worlds.

Magnus shook his head. "It would be much easier if you just gave in to it. Easier for all of us."

Donovan didn't comment; he didn't dare say what was on his tongue.

"The Protectorate, the Dead Walker society, is controlled by your soul, your blood," Magnus said. "The sake of the world rests upon our actions. You are now the Lord Protector of our realm. Do you understand the meaning of such words?"

Your soul rises even above those of the gods of ancient times."

"I am merely a thin line," Donovan said, his words laced with a bitterness even he realized was a bit much. "A tightly pulled rope hanging in the balance between man's world and that of the undead. A god ... truly you jest." He did not tell Magnus about Vastos's bite, about how he could turn into a dark lord on the instant, despite his lifelong fight for the good and the just. No, he'd never put the Protectorate at stake like that. The quicker the organization was free of him, the better off they would all be.

Magnus remained silent.

"What right do we have to play God in this mortal world? Tell me, Magnus. Who gave us such authority?"

The man eyed him with a cautious stare. "Who is to say your so-called God did not deem it so?"

A chill ran down Donovan's spine. He hadn't thought of it in that manner before. "If I am what *you* have deemed a god, then my word rules. And if I choose to abdicate my seat as head of the Protectorate, then you will have to abide by my wish." Donovan headed toward the door. He turned the knob and made his way across the threshold. "When I reach my decision, I'll be in touch. Good day, Mr. McKei." He never turned back.

* * * *

Magnus closed the door.

A shadow appeared near the window and formed into the shape of a man. "He's going to be more difficult than I had

previously thought," Angus Bramwell said. "Far worse than my son, even. I should never have allowed him to remember his father's death or allowed him to think he had failed in some way. I should have told him Icení wasn't the girl captured by Vastos. Mayhap it would have served Donovan better to have no memories of East Angliae. I should have erased them when I had the chance. He's suffered so much because of my mistakes."

"You had no choice, my Lord" Magnus answered. "You were merely doing as the gods had instructed. You never expected him to escape the priest and return to camp. 'Tis not your fault."

Lord Bramwell drew the curtains closed and took a seat near Magnus's desk. "Yes, but he was right to be angry with me then, as he is now. Even after all these years, my only heir knows nothing of me, or of my world, other than what he deems as terror. I should have explained to him, been more caring. I should have told him about Upyra and Ityca, about Vastos and myself. He should have known Vastos and I were twins. That Upyra was our mother."

Magnus approached Lord Bramwell. He offered him a crystal goblet filled with a ruby red liquid. "Perhaps a drink will do you some good, my lord. It is a blend of Port."

The blood mixed with wine flowed smoothly down Angus's throat. "We must find a way to bring Icení and Donovan together. The prophecy must be fulfilled or the world will suffer greatly. Find a way, Magnus. You must."

"Fear not, my lord. Measures have already been taken that will ensure your grandson's ascension to the seat of the high

kings. Donovan will take his rightful place as Lord Protector, even if it costs me my own life. The Protectorate will never die."

"I suppose I will eventually have to meet with him and explain about my crossing over, my complete turning."

Magnus sat down in the chair next to Angus's. "Donovan will have many years left to his quasi-mortal life before he must become a full-fledged vampire. You will have more than ample time for explanations. Right now we must see to it he fulfills his birthright. And we must do so quickly. I fear Vastos will attempt to covet your throne as he did when your son died."

"He's wanted my position since birth," Angus said. "In truth, I can't remember a time when my brother and I weren't at war. If only I knew more of his present situation, I would be less concerned for Donovan."

"It is my hope that Luther will bring good news upon his return from the Upyran Kingdom," Magnus commented. "Once we have solid information about Vastos's current plans, the council will prepare the Protectorate for whatever is needed. Luther is by far the greatest spy we have. He won't fail us."

Lord Bramwell rose from his chair. "The last time we sent a spy into Upyra's realm, Vastos retaliated by infiltrating Caesar's army. He nearly annihilated the entire Protectorate single-handedly. Here and across the empire."

"I doubt Vastos is up for that strong of a battle this time."

Angus stared Magnus in the eye. "Can you swear that upon your soul?"

Magnus didn't answer.

* * * *

The Upyran Kingdom

Luther von Brauer hid in the shadows, thankful for the fact quasi-vampires couldn't be detected in Upyra unless they specifically came out and announced the uniqueness of their souls. To anyone he'd have a chance meeting with tonight, he would appear as nothing more than mere vampire. But still, Luther knew the implications of being caught as a spy. Quasi or no quasi, he'd be put to death the Upyran way, the ancient torture of bloodletting. And at present, the notion of bleeding to death didn't exactly appeal to him.

Skirting a corner, Luther left the safety of his first post and headed toward the royal palace. He'd come this route before, making a mental map in his head of the dark, slippery path winding its way to Upyra's palace. Nothing had changed in the almost two thousand years since he had last been here. The kingdom of Upyra remained locked in a time warp, no paved roads, no electrical lights, and no homes for souls other than those of the nobility. But one thing did change. Along the route Luther noted an increase in the number of heads impaled upon stakes. He'd counted twice as many as he'd remembered from his last visit. Apparently Upyra's obsession with the Great War between the Upyrans and the Itycans hadn't diminished. Her grudge against Ityca and his allies for punishing her for her sin of giving life back to Vastos was still strong. And the old queen held on to her old torture methods,

Luther thought. The menacing acts dated back to the days when she last called out her full armies against the Itycans.

Hammered to each stake sat a small wooden plaque noting the person's crime. Spies outranked thieves three to one. He could only imagine what would be done to him, a vampire spy from the mortal realm, allied to the Itycan's. He had no choice; he could not get caught.

Luther reached the palace gates, moonlight still his only illuminating guide. He studied the large metal sentinels, searching for the best way to enter the royal courtyard. The rusted iron fretwork sat perched on broken hinges, while overgrown vines wrapped themselves around small arrowheads lining the top of the fence and gates. Luther slipped through an opening where two parts of the fence met but had come undone, apparently worn by time. If memory served him right, Upyra had guards posted inside the courtyard, hiding in small arch-shaped niches set into the palace stone. Getting caught by a guard wasn't in his plan. He hated to waste precious energy by shape shifting if he didn't have to, but seeing no other choice, he took a deep breath and changed form. Like a bat out of hell, he made his way across the courtyard, leaving nothing but the slightest of black blurs and a gust of wind in his wake. He landed on the palace rooftop.

Shifting back to mortal form so he wouldn't waste any more energy, he squatted along the edge of the roof. The hem of his cape whirled around his boots. Somewhere below his feet, Vastos and Upyra stirred. He sensed them, felt their hearts beating, pumping with the blood of those they had

feasted on tonight. But unlike the past, he felt something more, something darker, deeper. Luther closed his eyes and concentrated. His soul churned, twisted in encroaching darkness. He gasped. Overcome by a force greater than anything he'd ever experienced in his entire existence, Luther fell backward, his feet literally kicked out from under him.

Pain...

The feeling came directly from Vastos, of that, Luther was sure.

He caught his breath and rose to his feet.

In the courtyard below, a troop of guards scurried about, running from their hidden posts to the main palace steps.

Luther wondered if Vastos had sensed his presence and then called in the guards. Or possibly they gathered because of whatever had caused the dark lord his great agony. No matter the reason, Luther needed to get into the palace and find out why Vastos had been antagonizing the Protectorate as of late.

He waited for the courtyard to clear. Then he hurled himself over the edge of the building and into an open window below.

The room he landed in was cold, dark and empty. The pungent odor of herbs mixed with spices teased his nostrils. Broken glass littered the floor beneath his boots. *An apothecary.*

Stealthily, Luther made his way across the chamber and into the main hallway making every effort to maneuver about as silently as possible. A group of slaves passed him in the corridor, each dressed in a black woolen cape, their eyes

hidden beneath hoods drawn down close to their faces. Luther shuffled into the line, making sure the hood of his own cape had been pulled down as far as those of the Upyran slaves.

The rattling of glass bottles hitting against one another disrupted the dead air blanketing the hallway. Luther eyed the slaves walking next to him. Each soul carried a small wood and metal crate filled with glass vials and crystal jars. The same pungent odor from the room swirled up in vapors from the crates. *Apothecary workers.*

He couldn't go wherever they were going with his own hands empty. The lack of a wood crate or some sort of apothecary item would be a dead giveaway he wasn't an Upyran. Luther turned to the man at his left. "Give me a set of vials."

"Never," the man answered.

Luther reached for a glass jar nestled in the man's crate.

The man pushed him away. "Where are your own tools?"

He remembered the glass in the apothecary. "I dropped them coming in from the courtyard."

A guard approached. With a long, pointed pole, he jabbed the man walking next to Luther. "Causing trouble again, Apgar?"

"Of course not, my lord," the man answered. He quickly handed Luther a set of vials filled with herbs and a jar of red liquid. A cursed glare accompanied his actions.

Luther took the items and pushed his way forward through the line of slaves. Around the corner, they entered a lavish apothecary at least five times the size of the small room he

had first entered. A group of mages huddled in the center of the chamber, a limp body at their feet.

Luther knew on the instant the body upon the floor belonged to Vastos.

A whip snapped in the distance, causing slaves to shudder. "Move," a guard yelled.

Luther made his way toward a set of tables lined against the far wall and began mixing the herbs and liquid he'd been given. He watched the other slaves work in silence, each of them focused on the preciseness of measuring dry ingredients against liquid. He tuned out their thoughts, clearing his mind to concentrate on the mages leaning over Vastos. Despite his preternatural hearing, he picked up nothing more than muffled whispers against the low growls of pain emitting from the dark lord's own mouth.

Luther continued mixing the herbs.

A woman entered the chamber followed by a parade of well-dressed, over-jeweled maids.

Queen Upyra.

"What have you done to my son?" the queen cried. She fell to her knees and raised Vastos's head into her lap.

With Vastos's growls now somewhat subdued, Luther listened intently, his preternatural hearing focused on Upyra, Vastos, and a mage dressed differently than the others. Only one mage wore a red suit decorated with black braiding and chain mail, the others dressed in unadorned black tunics and leather pants. Luther distinguished the oddly dressed man as Vastos's top alchemist or apothecary.

"We've done nothing, your majesty," the mage answered.

"Then do something for him now."

"I cannot."

Upyra reached up and grabbed hold of the man's jacket, pulling him close to her face. "If you do not heal my son, I will have you bled."

"He is dying," the mage said. "And it is his own fault."

Upyra kept her fingers clenched tightly about the mage's clothing. She turned to Vastos, but the dark lord offered nothing more than a moan. "What is meant by such words?" Her wrath fell back to the mage.

"He bit an Itycan but never completed the bite. Now the same soul is coming into Vastos's own body, and its powers are draining your son's."

Vastos moved.

From the corner of his eye, Luther saw the dark lord's hand reach for the hem of Upyra's gown.

The queen let go of the mage and lowered her head closer to her son's.

Luther couldn't hear Vastos's words. His voice was too weak to be picked up by even preternatural hearing.

A cry of outrage emitted from the queen's lips. She tossed her head back, and then leaned forward once again, hovering over her son's limp body. "You must kill him, Vastos. I won't lose you a second time."

Luther swore an oath under his breath. He wished he could have heard the name of the vampire Vastos had bitten. The same soul was rumored by the Protectorate to be a threat as equal in power as the dark lord, mayhap even more so. But

without a name, the Protectorate had no idea which enemy they faced.

A guard approached the table where Luther worked. One of the lesser mages accompanied him, looking over the shoulders of each working slave as he made his way down the aisle. The powerful energy of darkness pricked his spine. He hated being in the Upyran realm, surrounded by nothing but ill thoughts and oppressive rules. Luther shielded his thoughts by inverting his mind's focus to the task of mixing herbs and nothing else. He prayed to the gods the mage didn't find out his true identity.

"That one," the mage said, pointing to Luther.

His heart began to beat wildly. He licked his bottom lip and took a deep breath, ready to do whatever was necessary to escape. Never would he allow them to bleed his body.

A burly guard reached over Luther's shoulder and pulled the vial of herbs and blood from his hand. "Are you deaf, slave?"

Luther didn't answer. His mind wandered to a new worry. If he hadn't correctly mixed the concoction in the vial, it could kill Vastos, and then the Upyrans would kill him for committing the crime. If he died, he couldn't report back to the Protectorate. Vastos had to live for the moment. And considering he had little training in how to heal an Upyran, Luther had no way of knowing if the medicinal potion he had made would suffice or not. He held his breath.

With eyes glaring just slightly above the floor, Luther watched the lesser mage return to his post at Vastos's side.

The vampire handed the vial to his master and then stepped back to stand with the other mages of his rank.

Upyra lifted her son's head, helping Vastos into a sitting position. The dark lord took the concoction administered to him, drinking the mixture in a single gulp. He coughed once, and then fell back into the queen's lap.

Muffled sounds emitted from the huddled bunch. Luther strained his hearing once more, eager to learn Vastos's secrets.

"I won't kill him," the dark lord said, his voice weak, and uneven. "I cannot."

"You must," Upyra said.

"No, you do not understand. I ... live through him."

The queen appeared to pull away from her son, an anguished torment gnawing at her soul.

Luther sensed the woman's fear.

Vastos pushed himself to a sitting position using his own strength.

A sense of relief flooded Luther's body. His concoction had worked.

Vastos turned to the queen. "He offers me the chance to experience life as I was meant to experience it. I am not ready to give that up by killing him."

"There is another way," the head mage commented.

Queen Upyra glanced up at him, her long, black hair shifting softly about her shoulders. "Tell us how."

The mage hesitated. "There is still the matter of the last Celtic tribe that had allied itself with your kingdom, your

majesty." The mage paused. A look of grave concern crossed his face.

Vastos took a deep breath.

Luther bent his neck to the side and nudged the hood of his cape back a bit, giving him a better view without revealing his face completely. He eyed Vastos with a cautious stare, more careful to ensure he hid his thoughts, his identity.

The dark lord stretched, his body seeming to regain its former vigor. He turned to the mage standing above him and waved his hand in a gesture for the vampire to continue.

"The Ceni relic," the mage said. "The amulet of the Ceni kings still contains the magic of its makers. Piece the relic together and those powers will transfer to whomever holds the item in his or her possession."

Vastos rose to his feet. "The Ceni relic is split in three and I only have one third. That means I'd have to find not one but two missing parts. A feat impossible."

Upyra laced her arm around her son's. She walked with him toward the door, slowing near the tables of slaves.

Luther pulled the hood of his cape down around his eyes, concealing his face again.

"You have one third the relic," Upyra said to Vastos. "And we know the girl, the Ceni heir, is in possession of the second third. You need only find the final piece and the relic can be assembled once more. Absorbing the Ceni powers will renew your strength, for they are equivalent to your own Upyran blood, due to their allegiance to our realm. The gods made it so in exchange for the Ceni fighting against the Itycans and, ultimately, against the Protectorate."

A pensive look veiled Vastos's face.

How much the dark lord resembled Donovan. It made Luther shudder. Even their eyes were the same—deep, dark, and swirling with secrets he imagined no soul could ever learn.

"Then I need to find the Ceni heir first."

"No," Upyra said. "Keep a watchful eye upon her, but search for the second part of the relic before you approach her directly. You'll want to have two thirds the power on your side, and then she'll be willing to bargain with you."

"Bargain? For what?"

"Her soul. Entice her to give you the relic in exchange for freeing her soul. If she's as intelligent as our spies claim, she will be more than glad to be rid of the hold we have upon her soul."

"But isn't she the key to unlocking the power?"

"Yes," Upyra said. "However, once you have the relic in one piece, you will be stronger than she. You can claim not only the relic's powers, but hers as well. Then you'll have no need to live through that vile being you've bitten." A look of disgust crossed Upyra's face. "I can taste his blood on my lips, just by thinking of what you've done. How could you? After all I did in breathing life back into you when you were stillborn. I've given you all that darkness can give, and you turn around and drink from the light. You've betrayed me, Vastos. You've betrayed your own mother."

Upyra walked away, leaving Vastos to his own thoughts.

Luther had heard enough. Vastos had been entering the mortal realm to experience mortal life, life away from the

darkness of his own evil existence. Someone within the Protectorate had been feeding Vastos's most secret desire. Now Luther just needed to learn the identity of that soul. And gods help the vampire who had been bitten, for once he learned his identity, Luther promised himself he'd do anything and everything within his power to wipe that soul from the face of the Earth. He'd never let the Protectorate be destroyed.

Chapter Three

Footsteps echoed in the outer corridor, and Icení closed her eyes and concentrated. She hadn't expected to be disturbed so soon after having found her way inside the house. Her mind focused on the approaching soul walking down the hall.

Donovan...

She easily felt him, his powerful essence illuminating his presence. His Vampyric aura was unlike any she had ever encountered before. The man was made up of both calm and chaos. He bore two distinct sides of one soul. The revelation stunned her. She wondered how he had managed to exist all these years with such turmoil colliding within him.

The footsteps grew louder. He was coming closer.

Icení hated getting caught. But Donovan didn't abide by the vampire's way of living. By the looks of things, he preferred living life as a mortal, aboveground and sleeping in a four-poster bed. Mayhap she should have studied him a bit longer before deciding upon her unconventional path of introduction. Forcing him to help her in her cause would have been much easier if he had taken to rest in a coffin rather than a bed. She knew her way well around darkened chambers, graves, sarcophagi and even catacombs. Bedrooms were entirely strange territory.

Her eyes ached. Small rays of sunlight struggled against the drapes, and she scanned the chamber for a safe haven. The man had impeccable taste when it came to antiques and

collectibles, but apparently he had no penchant for overindulging. He kept furnishings to a minimum. No wardrobe, no dresser, not even a single coffin for humor's sake. The room contained a marble topped fireplace, a chair, a bed and a small chest, nothing more.

The footsteps grew louder, and Icení eyed the drapes and winced. She new dawn was near and hated having to take the chance of being burned by hiding at the window. But she had little choice in the matter. Racing for the heavy velvet panels, she swung open the fabric and then closed it over her body just as the door creaked open.

Over the years she had become accustomed to living life on the edge, narrowly escaping danger many times over. But toying with Donovan Bramwell wasn't a task she easily welcomed. She held her breath. From what she'd heard, Bramwell was a fair man. But whether or not he would consider her plight a just cause after having broken into his house, invading his private quarters, and doing what she was about to do, she had to wonder. Her heart raced. The gods had better find a way to forgive her. If not, she was definitely doomed after today's upcoming escapades.

Donovan entered the room, and she watched him with preternatural sight, noting his movement around the chamber by the shifting, glowing red shadow emanating from the heat of his body. Donovan was indeed what others said he was ... a quasi-vampire. He still had mortal blood running through his veins.

He approached her side of the room, and she held her breath, stopped her heartbeat.

He hesitated in front of her, and she realized a protruding bulge puckered the drape panel directly in front of her body. Icení sucked in her already small stomach and cursed to herself for having given in to the fashion preferences of the day. Corsets of old were far better for making a body slenderer when hiding in the limited confines of small areas than the loose, sheer gowns, considered the height of present fashion.

Donovan reached for the drapes, and her heart sank. Then he backed away.

She silently let out a deep breath. In all her years of roaming the Earth, never once did she come so close to being caught. The realization unsettled her.

Donovan sat upon the bed and removed his boots. Then he undressed.

No valet. The man either preferred his solitude or he was frugal. Judging by the expensive furnishings and the imported silk drapery, Icení decided it was the former.

The sun seared her skin. A slight tingle danced across her flesh, and she prayed Donovan had a vulnerability to sleep.

The sleeve of a white silk shirt skimmed her slippers as Donovan tossed it toward the drapes. Exotic spices filled the air, rising from the garment. Bergamot, sandalwood ... she identified the scents one by one as each wafted to her nostrils. Gods, the man smelled good. Icení prayed for herself now, for her own will power.

Donovan rose from the bed and removed his pants, and Icení didn't think she'd survive. The thought of the task at

hand, coupled with the fact Donovan now stood naked, unraveled whatever sense her mind had left.

He pulled back the coverlet and once more sat down upon the bed. He dropped his body backward, reclining against the pillows.

Iceni waited for him to pull up the covers, but he did no such thing. The sun at her back grew stronger. She inched her body ever so slightly forward.

The pace of his breathing changed. He slept, and Iceni thanked the gods for that minor good fortune. She slipped from behind the drapes, ever so careful not to allow extra light into the room. Her slippers glided over the plush area rug. Step by slow step, she made her way to the foot of the bed and stood in silent awe gaping at the specimen lying before her. Now she knew what other women gossiped about when they talked about the "size" of their men. Donovan was tall, muscular, and his manly parts were far more endowed than she ever imagined such parts to be. She wondered what her circle of friends would say when she told them all vampires definitely were not created equal. The thought jarred her senses for a brief yet delightful moment.

Donovan stirred, and Iceni froze. He shifted. Nothing more than a slight turn of his head, and Iceni brought her hands to her temples and made small circles with her fingers.

Breathe, she ordered herself. She needed to relax or she'd never be able to successfully seduce Donovan Bramwell. And she needed to win the man over to her side or she'd find her own soul an unwilling ward of the dark lord Vastos forever. She dropped her hands to her waist and fumbled with the

ribbon tied beneath her breasts. It didn't matter what she'd have to do for the sake of her freedom. If she acted fast, she'd have no time to think about seducing Donovan.

The flowing gown easily came free. Icení lifted the sheer fabric over her head, making sure never to lose sight of Donovan's sleeping body. She tossed the gown to the floor. Bending down, she undid the ribbons on her slippers and slid her bare feet free.

Placing her knee upon the bed, she nudged her body forward. Smooth silk and rough wool caressed her calf. The odd mix made for a stirring sensation. She placed her hands in front of her and crawled like a baby.

Donovan didn't flex so much as a muscle. Sleep coveted him like it did any other vampire, consuming him totally and utterly. Icení wondered how long she, herself, would be able to remain awake. Fighting the sun that had stung her back at the window had drained her. She'd fought long and hard to overcome the sleep that day brought upon the vampire. But still, she wasn't fully human. Her quasi blood could go only so long before succumbing to the overbearing powers of the sun.

She continued to crawl over the sheets. Her hands glided easily upon the silk, and her legs shifted forward one at a time. Donovan bent his knee, brushing the outer edge of her calf.

She froze. In an instant, he was on top of her. He'd caught her, rolled her onto her back, and now his weight bore down upon her bones. The man was made of lean, dense muscle. A sudden urge to reach out and run her hands over his strong

arms and chest overwhelmed her. She had never known a more perfect form than that of Donovan Bramwell.

"I've let you toy with me long enough, my lady."

"You knew I was here?"

He laughed, flashing a wickedly seductive grin.

She huffed. No man had the right to be so handsome, especially when such a fact interfered with her goal. Even with annoyance rising within her, Icení found it hard to resist Donovan's charm.

"I know everything, my lady."

"Good, then you will have no need for me to explain myself."

His deep brown, almost black, eyes glared at her. Mayhap she would be better to explain herself. "My name is Icení. I'm a quasi-vampire, descended of the ancient royal Celts."

A look of disbelief veiled his eyes, and she sensed anger in him, a storm brewing in his soul.

"A royal Celt? Of which ancient tribe?"

"The Cení, my lord. I am heir to my father's kingdom."

He squinted, and Icení sensed a deep agony rage through Donovan's soul. "Please," Icení said. "I need your help."

"Why?" Apparently, he still had trouble fathoming what she was telling him.

"Vastos has something that belongs to me and I want it back." She hesitated. What if he didn't believe her? Worse, what if Vastos had heard her? The dark lord was known for hearing even the slightest of whispers spoken by those who feared him. "I will pay any price, do anything, for the sake of taking back that which is rightfully mine."

Donovan didn't know what to believe. The woman beneath him was coy, clever and had an odd sense of beauty. Her long black hair flowed free from a ribbon weaved into the shiny locks. She reminded him of a Roman goddess from the days of old. But no such woman would be as clever as a common thief. And the girl he'd tried to save was supposedly dead, taken by Vastos after he'd bitten Donovan. For Iceni to impersonate her didn't make sense. Unless, of course, she was working for Vastos and this whole scheme was nothing more than a cruel trick. The notion sickened him. "Why break into my house?"

"I thought to seduce you," she said. "Give you something you couldn't resist. It is all I have to offer."

He laughed to himself. A woman of Iceni's beauty would certainly have seduced him well. Indeed, the thought of such actions sent a charge of heat directly to his groin. He ignored his reaction to her and said, "And what makes you think I would fall for your charms, Dead Walker?"

"I have experience, my lord."

That he didn't believe. Iceni had a natural beauty any man would covet, and he had no doubt she had used her looks in the past to get what she wanted or needed. But on the matter of intimate experience, her soul's aura proclaimed nothing but innocence. "Trained by the daughters of hell, no doubt."

She nodded, a flush of bright pink rising in her cheeks, and he did everything within his powers to refrain from laughing.

Donovan loosened his grip on Iceni's wrists and slid off the bed. He scanned the room looking for the gown she discarded earlier. He found the garment at the foot of the bed. Bending

down, he retrieved the sheer piece of clothing. The intoxicating scent of lavender teased his nostrils. Damn, but the woman smelled good. He hated succumbing to such easy charms.

"What do you plan on doing with me?" Icen's voice interrupted his illicit thoughts.

"First," Donovan said. "I plan on seeing you fully dressed." He walked to the side of the bed and handed over her gown. "Second, we will talk." He grabbed hold of a sheet, turned his back and walked away, the bed covering trailing at his side. He wrapped the length of cloth about his waist and folded his arms across his chest, keeping his back to her. He had fought many enemies in his day, but none that had ever smelled as good as this one, or who had possessed such beauty.

"Will you not help me fight Vastos?" Icen's worried voice tugged at his soul.

The woman was relentless. "Are you decent?"

He heard her huff. "Yes," Icen said. "I am dressed, my lord."

Donovan turned around and took a seat in the chair near the end of the bed. "I haven't decided what to do with you yet. I am not accustomed to having people break into my home. Whatever possessed you do such a thing? Why not simply send word to me by means of a letter or take the wild road and approach the front door with a simple knock?"

"I have no one else to turn to," she said. "I didn't think you would listen to me unless I had your undivided attention."

He refused to comment on that matter. "Vastos is a very dangerous soul. And I don't make a point of starting wars

with my enemies just because a beautiful woman asks me to. I need proof of who you are and if your cause is as just as you believe it to be. Vastos controls his own legions of Dead Walkers. If channeled right, he has the power to fight a good battle."

Iceni rolled her eyes. "Tell me something I do not already know, sir."

The woman had spark, a trait he liked in the opposite sex. But wit alone didn't make for a trustworthy character. And he certainly didn't need a woman to worry about on top of the Protectorate nonsense. Mayhap after a good day's sleep he would give Iceni a second thought. He rose from his chair and headed toward the door. "Since you prefer catacombs to bedchambers, I will have my man Simpson prepare a sarcophagus for you in the lower level of the house."

Iceni froze at the foot of the bed, and he looked at her and asked, "Is something wrong, my lady?"

"You read my mind? You even knew what I was thinking while hiding behind the drapes?"

He offered her a sly grin. "I read it all." Donovan opened the door and soft light danced into the bedroom from the hall.

A pink blush washed over Iceni's face. "I ... I do not know what to say."

Simpson appeared outside the doorway, dressed in his usual black attire. Donovan didn't comment on Iceni's words, fearing anything he would say would only serve to further embarrass the woman.

"Simpson," he said to his man standing in the hall. "See to it the Lady Icení is properly tended to. Her ladyship is accustomed to a Vampyric lifestyle."

The man nodded but said nothing. A mischievous twinkle glistened in his eye.

Icení skirted past Donovan and entered the corridor outside his bedroom. "Will you not at least consider my plight?"

"I am a very busy man, my lady."

Icení swore an oath in ancient Gaelic, and Donovan sensed a wave of dread rise in the woman's soul as she turned around and headed in Simpson's direction. He'd only known one soul to ever feel the same ... his own. "My lady..."

Icení stopped in her tracks and glanced back at him.

"What is it that you seek to take back?" he asked her.

A serious look graced her face. "My soul."

The answer stunned Donovan. He watched in silence as Icení faded from his sight, following Simpson down the hall and finally down the main staircase. The woman had ample reason to ask his help; he only wished he could believe in her story. He turned around and headed back into the bedroom.

A ray of sunlight filtered into the chamber from a small crack between the drape panels, and at the foot of the bed, hidden in the lush pile of carpet, a gold flash caught his eye.

Donovan crossed the room to see what caused the glimmering gold light. Bending down, he found a broken piece of what appeared to be an ancient relic, hanging on a gold necklace. A tremble shook his body as he realized the raised imprint marking the fractured charm was the same as the one

on the charm his father had given him to identify the girl he was to save so many years ago. He took a deep breath and tossed back his head. He didn't know what to believe anymore. If Vastos had returned, there would be nothing to stop the dark lord from tricking him and the Protectorate into another trap, as they did during the Roman invasion, and he could not let that happen to his people again. Not now. Not ever.

He walked to the old chest sitting next to his bed and placed the necklace inside a small pouch in the top compartment. Mayhap after a good day's rest he would have sense to distinguish between lies and truths. Until then, Icen's plight would have to wait.

* * * *

Luther paced the floor of the main council chamber at Bramwell Abbey, his mind sorting out the information he had learned in Upyra. He didn't like not knowing all the details. However, despite his anguish over failing to hear the name of the person Vastos had bitten, he would have to leave the matter for a later time. A more serious and pressing issue commanded his attention at the moment. He hadn't even had the time to tend to the burns he'd received on his way back from Upyra. He'd managed to flee the dark lord's palace with barely enough time to spare before the sun rose. The thick scar running down his bare arm reminded him of a vampire's vulnerabilities.

A loud thud echoed outside the main chamber. *They* were coming. The vampire elders and the one mortal never

named—the elite of Luther's world, a small, select group of no more than a handful of men and women who lived for the Protectorate. And at the head of the council sat Magnus McKei. The man's direct, unwavering demeanor didn't exactly appeal to Luther. But he hadn't had the energy to argue with McKei when the vampire invaded his mind earlier and called him to council. Besides, he was eager to hear what the Protectorate had to discuss about Donovan Bramwell.

Luther looked across the room as Magnus entered the chamber, a line of vampire elders at his heel.

He prayed to the gods he'd never end up like any of the other council members—staunch, rigid, and unbending in their traditions and laws. The drama of dogmatic ways had no place in his life. And yet, he had agreed to attend this meeting just the same. He cursed to himself. And he cursed his good friend Donovan, too.

The council assembled, each member taking his or her assigned seat.

Luther remained standing, and Magnus shot him an annoyed glance. Luther ignored the man.

"We have only one matter to discuss," Magnus said. He eyed the council members seated at the table, and then leaned his head in Luther's direction. The thin-rimmed spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose slipped downward, as usual. "Donovan has yet to send me confirmation of his acceptance of his birthright. I request we act before it is too late."

Luther took a step closer to table. "Did Donovan say he would send word within the allotted time?"

"That is not the point," Magnus said, fidgeting with the gold buttons lining his blood-red jacket. "We cannot take any chances."

"Donovan would never lie. He knows the state of the Protectorate and its importance. I say we wait."

Magnus turned back to the members seated at the table. He gestured with open hands, turning the decision over to the other members.

In front of each place setting lay a wooden stake, the weapon that represented ultimate death for a vampire. One by one, each member cast a vote by tossing the stake into the center of the table. Wood hitting against marble sent screeching noises through his ears. Luther stared at the table in the center of the chamber. Five thin, wooden stakes lay upon it, their points facing away from the persons who had placed them. Magnus cast his vote, following suit.

The council had outvoted Luther. The results didn't surprise him. It never did. But just this once, he wished his fellow vampires would see it his way. Now came the part he truly hated.

"You know what to do, Luther," Magnus said.

He was the henchman of the group. The man who had to plan and carry out any and all acts of retrieving the prodigal vampire, or the stray Dead Walker. He had to bring the lamb to slaughter. Some days he hated his position and today was one of those times.

Luther approached the table. He leaned in close to Magnus. "One day you will see things differently," he said.

"And when you do, I pray the gods will have more mercy on your soul than you have shown others."

He headed out of the chamber. Donovan wasn't going to appreciate being hunted down by a pack of immortal henchmen. Especially a pack led by a vampire he had once risked his own life to save. The gods, Luther knew, would one day make him pay dearly for this sin.

Chapter Four

Fear stirred Icení's soul. The onslaught of such intense emotions brought her back to the mortal realm of reality and from an already hampered and restless sleep. As she did every night upon waking, she instinctively reached for her neck, searching for the necklace she'd worn for almost two millennia. Her fingers had grown accustomed to gliding over the now worn but smooth contours of the ancient relic. But tonight they skimmed nothing more than naked skin.

She gasped. It had to be a dream!

Her fingers frantically scratched at the bare hollow of her neck. In despair, Icení leaned forward and pushed with all her might against the top of the sarcophagus she had slept in. The grinding of stone against stone echoed through the darkened chamber. Cold air caressed her body and chilled her to the bone.

Panic overwhelmed her. Using her preternatural powers, she forced flaming torches to ignite the room from their iron holders hanging from the walls. In the light, Icení searched her neck once more, and a cold void filled her heart. The relic was truly gone.

She hadn't been without the relic since the Romans destroyed her village. One-third of her people's powers remained contained within the ancient amulet.

She mentally retraced her steps from earlier in the day. The window, the stairs, the bedroom, the drapes, the bed...

She paused. The necklace must have come off when she had removed her gown in Donovan's bedchamber. It had to, for she could think of nowhere else it might be.

She scurried from the underground rooms to the main floor of the house, her thin slippers doing little in the way of shielding her feet from the hard, cold marble tiles lining the floors in the central hallways. She ascended the stairs in silence, and then stopped halfway up when the muffled sound of boots shuffling against carpet reached her ears. *Donovan.*

She turned around and headed back down the stairs. An open doorway greeted her only inches from the last step. Icení swung around the doorjamb, her hand brushing the gilt wood frame. She searched for a place where she'd look the most comfortable, the most natural.

Several gold, velvet-covered benches sat evenly spaced around the room. She skirted the bench closest to her and plopped down unceremoniously. The hem of her gown fluttered against the bench's carved leg, snagging itself on a jutting rose stem. Icení tugged at the fabric. The last thing she needed was to literally get stuck. With her Cení relic missing, her powers were at stake and she didn't like being so vulnerable, especially in Donovan's home. The sudden sense of being trapped overwhelmed her. Mayhap Vastos had sensed her plans, had managed to hear what she told Donovan and caused the relic to fall from her neck. Vastos might have destroyed her people in the past, but she refused to fall victim to him a second time. Somehow, she'd find a way to get justice, even if Donovan didn't agree to help her.

Iceni tried to release the hem of her gown, only to fray the fabric more, its dangling threads knotting around the bench leg. She cursed to herself.

Donovan entered the room, and her spine tingled. The man had an overbearing presence that for some reason irked her soul yet stirred her body. She looked up and cleared her thoughts. Donovan didn't need to read her mind a second time.

"I see you're a bit tied up at the moment," Donovan joked. "Mayhap I should return later."

"I don't find you amusing in the least bit. But I can use some assistance here."

Donovan got to one knee and began working the knotted fabric threads free. Iceni reached for the hem of her gown to keep the garment from getting in Donovan's way. Her fingers brushed against his, sending a tingling sensation down her spine. The cool touch of his large hand sent shivers through her body. Her skin puckered with goose bumps. She wondered what it would be like to be held by Donovan, have his strong, muscled arms wrapped tight about her body. She swallowed hard and tried to clear her head. No man had ever tortured her senses like this. Donovan certainly had a lot of nerve.

The entwined fabric fell loose, and Donovan rose to his feet.

Iceni looked away. A distant part of her wished it had taken longer to untangle her gown, yet why, she didn't know. She took a deep breath and prayed to the gods she covered her feelings well.

"Do you have an interest in portraits?" Donovan asked.

"Portraits? What do you mean?"

"You're the first guest I've ever found sitting in the portrait gallery."

Iceni scanned the room, and then turned to face Donovan who stood in front of her. A heated sensation stirred her blood. She could only imagine what secrets her flushed cheeks must have given away. Everywhere she looked hung portraits of the Bramwell clan—men, women, children. The paintings went on in what seemed like an endless procession of one family's heirs. At the far end of the room hung a gold-framed portrait covering the length and width of an entire wall. The odd painting was the only nonhuman portrait in the room. She didn't dare ask about the larger than life bat. Something in the beast's beady red eyes conveyed more than any words ever could.

"He has no name," Donovan said.

He'd read her mind again. She wished he would stop doing so.

"For as far back as I can remember my family has carried that portrait from one living quarters to another, giving the painting precedence over all others. No one ever gave me an explanation as to who it was." Donovan fell silent. He leaned against a bare panel of wall and stared down at the tile floor. "I suppose it represents the dark beast that dwells within the souls of all Bramwell descendants."

"You are lucky to have such a large family, my lord."

He offered a slight laugh. "Some are Bramwells by birth, but the rest are Bramwells by misfortune."

Iceni raised an eyebrow.

"'Turned' by my grandfather or earlier ancestors."

"Oh." The word escaped her mouth with a trailing gasp.

Simpson appeared in the doorway. "Your carriage has been brought round, my lord."

Donovan approached Iceni. The sense of apprehension still lingered strong in the woman's blood. He didn't like her being so ill at ease with him, but he decided against confronting her about her fears. He crossed the carpet, heading toward the door. "Come, I can have you dropped off at your home before I head out for the night."

"No."

Iceni's protest surprised him. Donovan stopped in the middle of the room and turned back to face her. "Very well, then tell me where you would care to be left off and I will see you there safely."

She fidgeted with the silk ribbon tied at her waist, and Donovan stared at her with deep intent. Then he lightly probed her mind. *Necklace ... Ceni...*

"I have no home, my lord," Iceni said, breaking his concentration. "I tend to wander like a nomad."

"I see." The pain of her great loss twisted inside his soul. The need to provide a home for the woman overwhelmed him. In silence, he chided himself for feeling like a young, infatuated pup. He didn't even know if his guest was his ally or his enemy. How could he feel for her in such an intimate way? "Perhaps you would prefer to spend another night here." The words fell from his lips before he even realized what he had said. But the damage had already been done and

he certainly couldn't recant. He had foolishly invited the woman to torment him further.

Iceni parted her full lips but gave him no answer. Donovan sensed she didn't exactly like being in his house, but that she had no choice in the matter. "It's best actually," he said. "When I return we can discuss your situation."

"Then you have agreed to help me fight Vastos?"

"I did not say that."

She bit her bottom lip, causing it to turn the shade of deep red berries, and then gave a soft pout. The vision she presented before him enticed his body like no other woman or vampyress had ever done. Perhaps it was only the combination of seeing her in a sheer, thin gown that left little to the imagination and her puckered, pouting her full lips. Mayhap hosting Iceni in his own living space wasn't exactly the best of plans, but at the moment he had no others.

"My lord," Simpson interrupted a second time. "The evening grows short."

Donovan eyed Iceni still standing near the bench. "I will consider your plight after we have had a chance to talk. Only then will I make a decision."

"Very well," she said. "Then I will accept your invitation to remain here until we have had the opportunity to discuss my situation in depth."

Donovan nodded. He turned on his heel and approached Simpson. He leaned in close, shielding his voice with a preternatural cloak only he could engage. "Keep the lady Iceni within sight at all times. She is to have free rein of the house."

Simpson tilted his head to one side, a look of confusion washing over his pale face.

"I have something that the lady has lost, and she still considers it to be where she left it. I would prefer to find her in the midst of looking for the item when I return."

Simpson nodded again.

"I shall return before dawn. If you need me, I will be at the club with Conor. I have something I need him to identify."

"Dealing in ancient Celtic relics again, my lord?"

Donovan shot him a faint grin. "You always know too much, Simpson. One day the habit might cost you."

The man didn't comment. "And what about your father, sir?"

Donovan took a deep breath and looked back over his shoulder. The portrait of his father dressed in full Celtic battle garb hung on the wall directly across from the door. "I have another twenty-four hours before I have to disturb his remains. I won't do so unless it is absolutely necessary." He turned back to Simpson.

"Does this mean you accept your birthright?"

"No, not exactly. Not yet." His mind wandered back to the gold amulet he'd found on the floor in the bedroom. Vastos could be a cunning soul, one who would think nothing of tricking his enemy into imagining anything he desired him to believe. Donovan now wondered if Vastos had tricked him all those years ago. Mayhap the dark lord had wanted him to believe the girl he was supposed to protect had been captured when, in reality, she had escaped. Vastos had a sick sense when it came to toying with people's lives and emotions. The

bastard would stop at nothing to make misery for others. Or, perhaps Icení was nothing more than a new ally, working for the dark lord in this century. Either way, he needed to find out. And the best expert on Celtic relics was Conor Ashwood, the only mortal Donovan trusted with his dark secrets.

Chapter Five

Donovan entered the Temple Barr gentlemen's club and immediately sensed Conor's presence. His friend had a kind, simple soul, setting him apart from the rest of Ireland's peerage. Conor's naiveté and innocence were what drew Donovan to the young aristocrat in the first place, and he'd formed a brotherly relationship with the man.

He crossed the room and headed toward the table where Conor sat with a number of their fellow peers. An ill feeling churned his soul. Conor rarely engaged in cards, horses or any other form of gambling, for that matter. But Donovan sensed something amiss among the men seated at the far table. Being the older of the set, he had grown accustomed to looking out for the Catholic Conor, taking him under his wing and seeing to the man's safety amid a peerage laced with religious racism. And the situation in Ireland was perhaps at its worst within the small underground society known as The Stags, an elite club made up of some of the wealthiest heirs in the land. Rich and ruthless had been the group's motto, and Temple Barr had become its unofficial home.

His nose twitched as the smells of smoke, liquor, and rich leather combined into an odd aroma. Another reason, Donovan reminded himself, why he hated coming to Temple Barr.

He approached the far end of the room and eyed Conor, who was seated at the table with the Stags' top members.

The confirmation of his earlier uneasiness didn't sit well with him.

"Gentlemen." He gave a slight bow of his head, and then he sat down in the one vacant chair near the middle of the long table. In a customary manner, a brandy snifter filled with the caramel colored liquor was set down before him. He nodded to a nameless servant, and then waved the man away.

"Merely a fun game of cards to pass away time, I assume?" He directed his snide remark to the leader of the pack, Edward Brooks, Marquis of Barr, seated across from him.

"You have no idea what you are missing, Bramwell."

"And I care not to find out."

Brooks leaned in against the table, his too tight waistcoat straining at the buttons. "The exhilaration of teetering on the verge of losing one's entire fortune is absolutely indescribable. And coming back from the brink is like heaven. Even better than spending a night resting upon Molly McNally's ample bosom."

The men gave up a chuckle.

Donovan turned to Conor, but said nothing. The young pup sat next to him in silence, his eyes transfixed upon a set of cards held within his hands. Over the last year or so, Conor had become distant, his mind appearing to focus on some unspoken worries. Donovan didn't like seeing his friend so despondent.

Brooks sat back in his chair and shuffled a few cards around in his hand. "Ash here has done quite nicely for

himself tonight," he said, nodding his head in Conor's direction. "Risking his entire fortune, only to win back three times its value. I do say, should fate continue to favor the lad, I might even consider becoming a Papist, for apparently allying oneself with the devil has done me little good tonight." Brooks raised his eyes from his cards and gave Donovan a fleeting glance. "Of course it probably doesn't help much having the bastard's own spawn counted as my peer."

Donovan knew Brooks's remark had been an ill jab aimed at Angus Bramwell. For some insane and ungodly reason, the Stags considered Angus a master of the dark arts, the very foundation upon which their illicit club had been built. If only they knew how close to the truth their sordid beliefs really were. The thought made Donovan laugh to himself. His peers, save for Conor Ashwood, knew nothing of the vampire that ruled his soul. Angus had gained a reputation of being a dark, sinister character ages ago, feared by his mortal neighbors and hated by his Vampyric enemies. Having such a stigma attached to his name disturbed Donovan. The only good to ever come of it was the ease in which he had infiltrated the Stags. The open invitation meant he had little need for his preternatural abilities. Of course, when only the Vampyric way would do, Donovan had no trouble engaging his cursed gift.

"Join us, Bramwell," Brooks said.

The gentlemen seated at the table folded their cards, their wagers recorded by a servant. With more than a mere bit of reluctance, Donovan gave in. He nodded his head and

motioned with his hands to be included in the current hand being dealt.

The men fell silent, lost to their game, and Donovan stared at the cards in his hand. Then he scanned those laying face up, scattered about the table. The results didn't add up. There were more aces than the gods themselves could count. A worrisome fear crossed his mind. Considering many a man had ended up dead when caught cheating. Donovan wondered who among his peers would be desperate enough to do such a thing again. Cheating at Temple Barr was like playing with fire, mayhap even worse.

He glanced at his fellow club members and engaged his Vampyric abilities. The men remained silent, lost to their cards and their hardy drink. He hated using the gifts his grandfather had given him among mortals, but the present situation forced him to do so. The last thing Donovan wanted was for one of his peers to end up as nothing more than a pile of broken bones on the street below. Despite his dislike for most of the men he was forced to associate with, he would never wish any of them dead. He raised his gaze to each of the gentlemen seated around him. One by one, he read their thoughts.

Wives ... money ... mistresses ... horses ... vanity ... The men, with whom he had kept company tonight, all thought the same, save for the one seated at his right. He cursed to himself. Only one person at the table had worrisome thoughts floating around in his head, and the realization of it caused Donovan a bit more than the average sense of grief. Of all the members of the Temple Barr Gentleman's Club, Sir Conor

Ashwood was the last person Donovan would have ever suspected of cheating. His best friend was the most honest person Donovan had ever known.

He had to put an end to this before Conor ended up as a lifeless, empty shell, broken on the street outside. More men than he cared to remember had met their end at the hands of the Stags, and all for cheating. The last fellow to upset his peers met with a horrific death, thrown from a third story window. Donovan decided there and then that Conor was not going to be the Stags next victim.

He stared at the men seated around the table, and with nothing more than a slightly glaring stare, he forced each one to fold their cards, rise from their chairs and bid each other a civil farewell. They never suspected they were being directed by a vampire's abilities. Donovan nodded to each of them and watched the men make their way toward the door.

"Not so fast, Ashwood." He grabbed hold of Conor's jacket sleeve. "I think you should leave with me. We have a bit of business to discuss."

Conor stumbled. "Really, Bram, now's not the time."

No soul dared to call him Bram, save for Conor. His peers knew how he loathed the name and he made it quite clear he never wanted to hear it spoken aloud. Donovan reached out and steadied his friend. "You're drunker than I thought." He helped Conor to the door and then down the steps. In the man's present state, there was no way he could ask him about the Celtic relic he had found earlier. Investigating Icen's story would have to wait until another time.

"I'm really quite capable of walking on my own, thank you." Conor pulled his arm away from Donovan's grasp. He grabbed hold of the tapestries hanging in the hall and clutched the swaying fabrics as he made his way down the stairs.

Donovan watched his friend with a cautious eye. Visions of tumbling wall hangings coming undone from their brass brackets and snaring Conor flooded his mind. He cursed to himself. The man had never been one for trouble.

Finally escaping the steps and the tapestries, they stepped out into the front garden without incident. A cool breeze blew through the quiet night air.

Donovan pulled Conor into the shadows and braced the man against a stone pillar. "Why were you cheating?"

"Bloody hell, man," Conor said. "Hold your tongue, lest you get me killed. Have you no mercy in that cold heart of yours?"

"Precisely the opposite. That's why I broke up the game."

Conor wiped the back of his hand across his forehead.

"Don't ever accuse me of such a thing again, do you hear me? If you do, I will have no regret in telling them about your mother and the rosary beads you carry in your pocket." He leaned forward, his whiskey-scented breath perfuming the air, fanning Donovan's face. "They torch Papists," he said. "And ... vampires. Stags never found much favor in either one. I should know."

Donovan took a deep breath. He wanted nothing more than to grab hold of Conor's black jacket and shake some rational sense into him. But he refrained from doing so. His friend was drunk, and given that, he couldn't rightfully defend

himself. "I'm beholden to none, Conor. Neither Rome, nor King. And you know it."

"Ahh ... yes ... I forgot. The Devil incarnate, isn't that what they believe old Bramwell to be? The Stags' patron saint, god of all things tainted, especially whiskey and whores." He shook his blond head and then raked a hand through his hair. "No, they would never lay a hand upon you, would they, regardless of what they truly think. They fear and idolize your grandfather far too much." Conor took a step forward and stumbled. He steadied himself against a nearby tree. "We're much alike, you and I. Both born to Catholic mothers, and sired by ungodly fathers."

Donovan felt his patience wearing thin. He had no tolerance for this nonsense. "Why did you cheat? The cards belonged to you and there were too many of them."

Conor stared at him. A look of true hurt filled his eyes. "I've spent my resources. Every last penny."

"Good God, Ashwood. On what? Your fortune was one of the largest in the club."

"I married Siobhan."

"The tenant farmer's daughter?"

Conor nodded his head. "And we have a son."

Donovan didn't believe what he was hearing. Lord Ashwood would never have allowed his son to marry beneath his station, even though Conor was his youngest and not heir to his title.

"Siobhan died giving birth. My father found out, and he had my son taken from me. I've spent my fortune trying to

find the boy. He's just over a year old now, but I haven't seen him since the day he was born. His name is Samuel."

"Why didn't you come to me? How could you have kept this from me? Are we not like brothers? I have entrusted you with my darkest secrets. How could you have not told me this?"

Conor looked away. "I have my pride, Bram. Besides, as the boy's father, I alone am responsible for him." He paused. "I didn't want anyone to know, least of all my father. I thought by keeping my marriage to Siobhan and my son's birth a secret, no harm would come to either of them. I had hoped to find a way to take them away from Ireland. My plans were to venture to New York and make a new life for my family. But that never happened."

"Whom have you been dealing with that it would cost you your fortune to find your son?"

A pitiful laugh escaped Conor's mouth. "Who do you think? My peers? Bloody hell, no. I don't even know their names."

Donovan felt his friend's pain, his anguish. "I can help."

"I have nothing left to pay. Have you not been listening to me?" Conor punched the air with his fists, his apparent frustration over the situation getting the best of him.

Fearing the worst, Donovan reached out and pushed Conor back against the pillar. "Calm down, Ash."

"The wages I won tonight are already owed to the scum I have been paying in my search."

"I would never take your money," Donovan said. "You're like family to me. I'm here to help you because I want to help. Who was your last contact?"

"A man who has a work force made up of young orphaned boys. I pray my son is not among them, but with my father the way he is, I wouldn't put it past the man. He would probably sell me too, if he could get away with it."

A vision flashed in Donovan's mind. He knew only one soul who would stoop to such a sadistic level—Vastos. "I can help and I have the resources to do so. Meet me at Dun Sidhe and we will find your son."

Conor shook his head. "No. I cannot ask this of you. It is far too dangerous, Bram. We are dealing with politics, money, and the powers of the realm. My father's pockets reach deep, all the way to London, as does his blood. He is here only to settle things on behalf of my late mother. Otherwise he would never have agreed to set foot on this isle. I cannot let you put yourself in that kind of danger."

"And since when have you ever known danger to stop me?" Donovan offered a wicked grin. "Go get some rest."

Conor turned away and started for his carriage.

"And Ashwood," Donovan called. "Don't ever cheat again. A dead father does a son no good. Trust me, I know that fact firsthand."

Chapter Six

Donovan made his way toward the waiting carriage Simpson had sent. A slight rain sprinkled down in a misty vapor, cooling the night air and chilling him to the bone. Full-fledged vampires, he imagined, were accustomed to cold temperatures, but as a quasi, he was still very much alive in the mortal sense. The damp air went right through his jacket and waistcoat. He rubbed his hands over his arms and stepped up into the carriage.

"An early night, my lord?" His driver, Higgins, seated atop the carriage, leaned over the edge and tipped his hat.

"Yes," Donovan replied.

"Shall ye be wishin' to return to Henrietta Street?"

"Unfortunately, Higgins." Dublin had left a foul taste in his mouth tonight. He wanted more than anything to return to the solitude of his beloved Dun Sidhe. But with Icení at his townhouse, he had little choice in the matter. He had to return to Henrietta Street and deal with the beguiling creature before venturing to the country. Donovan thought about Dun Sidhe and the benefits of bringing Icení to the ancient castle. If she were indeed a spy, he could tend to the matter a lot easier in the open country as opposed to the confines of a city area. A battle between two quasies in the crowded streets of Dublin would cause a spectacle in the least sense of the word. The rolling hills of Dun Sidhe afforded him privacy. Mayhap a trip to the old castle would be beneficial to them both. The notion of taking a woman to his secret hideaway enticed him.

Save for Conor, he hadn't brought a visitor to the stone fortress in years, let alone a woman.

He wondered if he had given Icení enough time to wander through his town house, searching for her lost necklace. The idea of finding her on her hands and knees in his bedroom stirred his soul and his groin.

A heavy pressure thumped in his brain. He had much on his mind tonight, too much in fact, and he needed to sort it all out. The townhouse appealed little to him at the moment except for its beautiful guest. But knowing how the dark blood that had ruled his veins for centuries had caused him more than enough grief over the years, including uncontrollable urges no one could suppress, Donovan knew better than to act in the heat of the moment. He'd long lived with keeping his base desires in check. He knocked upon the carriage roof and then leaned out the open window.

"Take the long way back, Higgins. Mayhap even a short venture out of town."

The aged man looked concern. "But, m'lord, 'tis dark. And no sane man travels the country roads outside Dublin in the midst of night."

Donovan raised an eyebrow in question. He'd never known Higgins to fear anything, let alone a night drive. "Funny, it was my impression not even a highwayman dared attack the devil's coach." He raised a fist to the carriage door and pounded his hand against the Bramwell crest. "I believe even God thinks my grandfather to have been the devil incarnate. And if so, I wouldn't blame him. I've thought it meself at

times." He curled his lips into a grin. "I have no reason to fear a night ride Higgins, and neither should you."

The man stared at him. He started to open his mouth, but then closed it. Donovan knew the man wanted to say something to him, but for some strange reason, he chose to hold his tongue. "Are you all right, Higgins?"

"Yes, m'lord. I am fine. To the country roads, as you wish."

Donovan leaned back in the carriage and secured the door. He rested his body against the soft leather seat. The carriage pulled out into the night. Wheels turning over cobblestones and the sounds of horses' hooves echoed in his head. The rhythmic sounds helped soothe his soul. He wondered what the future would bring, what his grandfather's death would bring.

Visions of Icení filled his mind. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. For most of his life, he'd been infatuated with the girl he knew little of and had failed to save. He had imagined, often enough, what would have become of her had she been spared from Vastos's evil grasp. Every time he had seen a beautiful woman, a shy maid, a doting mother, his mind had wandered to the girl he hadn't rescued. Guilt at failing his father had haunted him every day of his life, and now he had to live with the fact that maybe he hadn't failed at all. And if so, then he had been wrong to have turned his back upon the Protectorate. He wondered how many rogue Dead Walkers he could have saved if he'd worked with his grandfather's people instead of walking away from their society. Either way, he hadn't fulfilled the destiny his father had wanted him to achieve. To think Vastos still

played games with people's minds unsettled him. He opened his eyes and reached his hand into his jacket pocket.

The cold caress of metal clashed against his flesh. He withdrew his hand and looked down. The small, gold Celtic relic lay in his palm. He closed his fingers around the item and took a deep breath. Mayhap he didn't need Conor to validate the relic after all. If Iceni was indeed who she claimed to be, surely her impression and that of her father's would have been embedded in the charm ages ago.

He cleared his mind of all thoughts, leaving room only for that which was to come to him from the ethereal plain. Swirls of smoke and fog filled his mind's eye.

Wars ... pain ... the loss of one's family ... centuries of roaming with no true home...

Donovan opened his eyes and sucked in a gasp of night air. Iceni had lived a life similar to his own. He swallowed hard. The notion of her being unprotected and hunted by Vastos bothered him beyond anything he had ever felt about anyone in the past.

Visions of her in the portrait gallery came flooding back to him. Her eyes, brilliant orbs of sapphire, opened wide at the sight of the Bramwell Bat. He laughed to himself. He'd never known a vampire or a quasi to be alarmed at the sight of such a creature. Iceni, despite her hardships, had a sense of innocence about her. A sense he suddenly felt compelled to protect, to shield, and to preserve. He wondered why he had been so fascinated with her. He'd had women, many to be precise, but never once did any of them sate his true desires. His mistresses, plucked from both the mortal and Vampyric

worlds, satisfied his body's yearnings but never those of his heart. He always felt alone, never loved. Donovan shook his head. He didn't need to think of such things at present. He had more important things on his mind than to think of his base desires.

He put the small relic back in his pocket and leaned his head out the window to breathe in the cool night air. The closed area of the carriage suddenly seemed to stifle him. Dublin faded in the distance, almost entirely gone from his sight. Growing uneasy, he leaned back inside the carriage.

Something stirred his soul.

He took a deep breath and buttoned up his jacket. An even colder chill than he had felt before now enveloped the small, moonlit space of his coach. The hairs at the nape of his neck stood on end.

A flash of black shadow swarmed past the carriage, and Donovan jerked his head toward the open window. Another dark shadow came down from the night sky, and yet still another. The swirling black masses hovered nearby, flying back and forth over the carriage, keeping up with the horses' steady pace.

Donovan needed no man or god to alert his soul as to the essence of the beings closing in on him. He knew them well enough on his own.

A swoosh echoed about the interior of the coach, and one by one, the three shadows entered inside. The carriage came to a jarring halt.

Three figures clad in black capes appeared from out of the shadows. Three vampires.

The first one—a dear friend—he recognized on the instant. "Good evening, my lord," Luther said.

The other two were known to him, but weren't as close to his soul as Luther. "M'lord," Greenly nodded.

"Mon Signor," Jacques said.

Donovan stared at them. His grandfather's henchmen. "And to what do I owe such pleasure, or should I say such misery."

"Lord Bramwell would never have greeted us in that manner," Luther said.

"Ah..." Donovan said. "So tonight you're the ring leader, Luther. And I thought it would have been Greenly here, or Jacques the Frog." He nodded to the other men.

"To mock us is not wise, my lord," Jacques said, the annoyance over the term demeaning his French heritage apparent in his tone.

"No, I'm sure 'tis not." He stared across the carriage to his old Germanic friend. "But then again, I've never been one for rules or proprieties, and you Luther, above all other souls, should know that fact firsthand. I am surprised to find your presence among such thugs." He didn't give a fig what those words would cost him. And knowing his grandfather's henchmen as he did, in time, they would cost him dearly.

Heavy silence descended.

Luther took a deep breath. "If you die, then so do we."

So, they were here on official business, Donovan thought. The dratted Abbey had once again come back to haunt him. "I really wish you wouldn't invade my thoughts like that. You have no right."

A look of frustration veiled Luther's face. "Perhaps we do not, but where the dynasty is concerned, then so are we. And on that account, we have every right."

Donovan shot him an angry glare. "The line ends with me. I will not allow the abomination of the vampire to continue." He lied. His only reason for not wanting to head the Protectorate was for the organization's own safety. Vastos's blood would never leave his veins and enter into another living being if he had any say in the matter.

Luther stared at him. "Why do you care for mortals, but not for your own blood? Are you so cold that our deaths would mean nothing to you? We, who have cared for you, protected you."

Donovan threw back his head. "Ha," he said. "Cared for me like a king cares for an urchin."

"You know nothing of the blood that courses through your veins, do you?"

"I know all I need to know. And don't lecture me on who protected whom." He glared at Luther. The vampire never acted like this. If he could count on one council member to see things his way, it was Luther. Even had he not saved the vampire's soul ages ago, Donovan was certain they would have eventually become friends. He had two true allies in this world—Conor and Luther. One mortal, one vampire, the balance evened the scales. But tonight, something was amiss with the vampire who sat across from him in the carriage. Luther simply wasn't himself.

He needed a way out. Taking a fleeting chance, Donovan kicked at the carriage door, leapt off the steps and headed for

the wooded area just beyond the road. He could outrun them and he did. Even a quasi-vampire's powers were no match for the superior abilities his grandfather had cursed him with. As Lord Protector, Angus Bramwell had passed down powerful mental and physical strengths only those born of Bramwell blood could inherit. And for once he was glad of it.

He made his way through the trees and into a grassy area. He could hear the three vampires in the far distance, their breathing growing ragged and their legs growing tired. He thanked the gods for setting the rule no henchmen could hunt him in bat form unless he had shapeshifted first. And he knew that in mortal form he could outrun his grandfather's men. Donovan smiled to himself. He had beaten them, bested his grandfather's henchman at their own game.

A pain tore through his ankle. In an instant, Donovan fell face down upon the dewy earth. He raised his head and looked back. His boot-covered foot hung over a large rock. "For the love of God almighty." He had tripped over an unseen rock.

A heavy weight crashed down upon his back, knocking the wind from his lungs.

The other two vampires swooped down on either side of him.

"Forgive me m'lord." A fourth man appeared in front of him. "But 'tis for your own good."

He regained his breath and his voice. "Higgins? How could you betray me like this?"

"Quite the contrary, m'lord. Simpson and I are two of your most loyal servants, and that is why I am here now."

"Take him," Luther called from the distance.

The vampire to Donovan's left grabbed hold of his arm. He pushed the jacket sleeve back and twisted Donovan's hand to the side, exposing his wrist.

A burning pain tore through his flesh. Donovan struggled beneath the vampire's grasp. "No!" he shouted. But his plea went ignored.

The Vampyric henchmen had clamped a set of drugging fangs over his skin and snapped them shut. The pointed device dug deep into his veins, dispensing a medicinal made to sedate him.

"Tis for your own good, m'lord."

Luther's voice echoed in his head and trailed to a low whisper. Donovan felt his body slowly giving in, going limp. Drained of all ability to move, a familiar sensation descended upon his soul. For the second time in his life, Donovan slipped into the dark abyss of nothingness.

* * * *

Vastos hunched over his desk, his mind concentrating on the gold piece, tossing it from one knuckle to the next, balancing the X-shaped ingot ever carefully as to not let it slip.

A thump followed by an echoing drag interrupted his game. The gold piece bounced off his fingers and vibrated on the blood-red leather desktop before falling flat. He grunted in anger.

"M'lord," a voice called from the doorway.

Vastos swung his chair around and eyed a slave standing in the outer hall. "How many times must I remind you never to speak unless spoken to first?"

The slave bowed his head, averting direct eye contact with Vastos. "Forgive me, m'lord."

"What could be so important that you dare to interrupt me?"

"The princess has been seen."

"Princess?"

"The last heir to the Ceni throne."

Vastos rose from his chair and crossed the room. He grabbed his black boots, then sat down upon the bed. "And where, pray tell, has the elusive Icení been found?"

"She has been seen in Dublin, Ireland, inquiring about the Protectorate and its new king."

The news wasn't what he wanted to hear. Vastos tugged on his boots and let out a deep breath. He'd been hunting Icení for centuries and never once had he successfully crossed the woman's path. And now that she had finally been located, his damned nephew had to get in the way. He hated family.

He rose from the bed and headed toward the door. "Does Queen Upyra know of this news?"

"No, m'lord." The slave continued to stare at the ground, fidgeting with a frayed rope belt tied at his waist. "You are the first to be told. Save for the Dead Walkers who alerted me, no one knows about the princess's whereabouts."

"Good," Vastos said. "Let's keep it that way." He leaned against the doorjamb and tapped his fingers upon the wood.

News that the Protectorate had a new king, wasn't something he would have had expected to hear for many years to come. He wondered what sordid scheme his brother had entered into to get Donovan on the throne. Only two vampires had the physical strength and the god-gifted power to fully turn Angus Bramwell. And considering the fact that he was one of those vampires, and Donovan the other, Vastos had to wonder what Angus was up to. No Celtic vampire king would ever give up his throne for the sake of another, especially when that person had distanced himself from the organization for more than a century. There had to be something more to this sudden change in Protectorate's structure. He didn't like it one bit.

A sharp pain assaulted his soul. Vastos doubled up, his hands knotted into fists at his stomach.

"My lord?" The slave reached out and grabbed hold of Vastos's arm.

He pushed the man away. "I am ... fine," he said, through labored breaths. Donovan was supposed to be the soul who gave him salvation, the one being through whom he could experience mortality. But the bite hadn't worked as he had planned. In recent days he had felt his body aging, slowly dying. He needed the Celtic relic belonging to Icení, and he needed to get his hands on it before time ran out.

Vastos took a deep breath and steadied the blood boiling in his veins. His soul slowly halted its twisting, knotting turns. He began to breathe once again in regular intervals.

Vastos removed his hand from his stomach and stood up. "Gather a small group of my men, including a few of my best

Dead Walkers," he said to the slave. "I leave for the mortal realm at dusk."

The slave's body trembled. A visible shake showed through his coarse tunic. "To find the Celtic princess?"

"Yes," Vastos answered. "To find Icení ... and more."

* * * *

Icení scanned the main corridor of Donovan's townhouse and then headed up the stairs. If it were up to her, she would have searched for her lost necklace the moment Donovan left the house. But, unfortunately, she had become an unwilling hostage to the man's valet for several long hours, listening to stories about ancient vampires and Celtic wars. At one point, she had begun to think Simpson would never let her out of his sight. But just as she had started to despair of the situation, the man left her alone to tend to some final chores for the night. She couldn't have been more ecstatic. Of all the possible topics one could talk about, Simpson had to choose history. She hated history, hated the past as it only brought her nightmares. Nothing good would ever come from attaching one's soul to days gone by. And no one knew that better than herself. The past only gave her grief.

Icení dismissed the haunting visions of her parents' torturous deaths that now began to filter back into her mind's eye. She took a deep breath and stopped at the top landing. After a moment to clear her thoughts, she poked her head into the empty hall and made sure no other person, or vampire for that matter, inhabited the space. Feeling a bit more secure in being alone, Icení headed down the corridor

toward Donovan's bedroom. Her necklace had to be somewhere in the man's private quarters, having come undone when she'd removed her gown the morning before. It simply had to be there.

At the door to Donovan's private domain, she froze. She didn't like invading his space in such a manner. It was bad enough breaking into the man's house, let alone to go snooping around like a common thief. If she could just ask Simpson to help her find the necklace, she would feel a lot better about the situation. But she didn't know if Simpson was someone she could trust and if he wasn't, then allowing him to help her search for the Ceni relic could prove disastrous. At present, the Ceni powers were vulnerable. Even an average vampire could gain strength if the charm came into his hands. Confiding in Donovan was a necessity; telling all to Simpson wasn't.

Iceni convinced herself the necklace held more importance than her reputation. She opened the door, careful not to make a sound.

The room stood dark, filled only by a single ray of moonlight filtering in from a slight crack separating the drapes. Everything remained in its precise place, just as it had the night before. She swore a mild oath beneath her breath. Donovan apparently had a penchant for organization.

She walked to the edge of the bed and got down on all fours, the thick carpet caressing her hands and knees.

The rich aroma of sandalwood rose from the carpet fibers and teased her senses. Thoughts of a naked Donovan came back to torment her. She wondered how many women he'd

tumbled on the floor, how many nights he'd spent relaxing on the carpet in front of a cozy fire, warming his cold skin. A heated sensation filled her body. Icení cursed to herself. Donovan had a way of getting the best of her and she hardly knew the man. She cleared her wicked thoughts from her mind. She needed to think of the relic and nothing else for the moment. Donovan could wait.

Icení reached under the bed, searching with her fingers, working her way through the dense wool fibers of the room's rug. Nothing. She wished she had more light. Without her necklace, the Vampyric abilities she'd been gifted with weren't as strong. She didn't want to waste precious energy in case she'd need it to flee in a hurry or to fight an unseen enemy.

Icení backed away from the bed and rose to her feet. She headed toward the drapes. After pulling the heavy velvet panels apart, moonlight cut a straight path across the room.

She turned back and dove halfway under the bed a second time. Suddenly, hands locked around her ankles. Startled, she let out a yelp.

"May I be of some help, my lady?"

Simpson. The man was becoming more a hindrance than a help. She caught her breath and relaxed a bit.

He pulled her out across the carpet and then released her.

Icení rolled onto her back. "I lost something last night and I was simply trying to get it back."

A cocky grin crossed Simpson's face.

Simpson's visions filled her mind. "I didn't lose that, sir!" she said in annoyance. "I assure you!"

He offered her a hand and pulled her up, and Icení dusted off her gown.

"May I be of assistance in helping you find whatever you are looking for?"

She shook her head. "No, never mind. I'll wait until Lord Bramwell returns. But thank you just the same."

"I am afraid that will be a very long wait."

"I do not mind. I have nowhere to go and, therefore, I can wait all night if need be."

Simpson rolled his eyes. "I am afraid it will be longer than that. Lord Bramwell will not be returning tonight."

The thought unsettled her. She wondered if Donovan had a mistress, or perhaps even more than one. A sudden sense of jealousy tortured her nerves. She couldn't remember a time she'd ever felt so possessive of another person. Feeling jealous of Donovan's unknown mistresses caused her to check her emotions on the spot. There could never be anything between her and the future vampire king.

Simpson turned on his heel and crossed the room. He pulled the drapes back to their former place, leaving a slight crack between the two panels. "His lordship will probably have my neck for this, but I believe my actions tonight have been far more dutiful than they have ever been." He turned around and faced Icení. "Do you truly desire my master's help?"

"Yes."

"Can you assure me you are not a spy for Vastos?"

The absurd implication angered her. "A spy? Is that what he told you?"

"No," Simpson said. "It is only what I surmise on my own."

She squinted in the dark, trying desperately to search the valet's facial features, but without the moonlight from the open drapes, she could see nothing. She wondered if the man told her the truth, or if he acted solely on behalf of his pompous lord and master.

Having no choice in the matter, Icení gave in. "Vastos destroyed my family, my people, and my kingdom. I am no spy of his. If the truth need be told, I consider myself his greatest enemy. He may have fellow vampires at odds with him, but I am a woman, and there is nothing worse than a female seeking revenge on behalf of her late family. I am fully prepared to die fighting Vastos, as long as my death will put an end to his evil ways."

"Good, then the Protectorate implores your help in a very delicate situation."

"And that being?"

"Convince Donovan to accept his birthright and ascend to the position of Lord Protector."

"Why would you want me to convince him? I would think your own people better suited for the job."

Simpson offered a slight laugh, then took her arm and headed her back toward the hallway. "To be a vampire king, Donovan must also secure a next generation for the throne."

"Plainly put, he needs an heir," she said. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"Precisely."

Icení didn't like where the conversation was heading. While she found Donovan increasingly attractive, she knew better

than to think the man would settle for a mere Ceni like herself, a woman with no tribe, no homeland, and no vampyric political powers. Donovan, she was certain, found amusement in women nearer his social standing. "My needs are not that strong, nor are my desires, thank you." She lied, but couldn't think of anything else to say. "I will seek Vastos on my own." She pulled her arm free from Simpson's grasp.

"I would never think of asking you to take part in the actual act, my lady. Merely use your charms to convince the man to take his rightful place within the Celtic vampire dynasty. Once Donovan is officially the Lord Protector, he will naturally accept other responsibilities, namely siring an heir. His base desires will increase at that time, and his body will refuse to allow him any other choice."

A slight twinge of regret touched her heart. For some odd reason, she found herself wishing she was the woman with whom Donovan would procreate. She dismissed the feeling. The thought of finally avenging her parents deaths had to appeal to her more than anything in the world, even more than finding the man of her heart. If she accepted the task being asked of her, she'd also be helping mankind. The Protectorate was legendary in their fight for man's survival against various evils in the world, especially in fighting the rogue Dead Walkers. For the gods knew Vastos had large legions of evil Dead Walkers under his command, including creatures from various worlds, not just the vampire realms. "Very well. I'll go along with your scheme provided you secure me Donovan's aid against Vastos. I want him to bring me to the dark lord so I can face my father's greatest enemy

in the flesh. I won't settle for anything less. Is that understood?"

"Of course, my lady." Simpson walked away from her and headed down the stairs. "However, I must tell you that once you accept this task, the gods will not allow you to turn back. Doing so will be impossible."

"I am a woman of my word," Icení said. "I would never think of reneging. I accept your offer."

"I am pleased," Simpson said from halfway down the stairs. "I assure you, my master will aid you in your cause."

She followed the man, a small disturbance knocking around in her brain. "Simpson," she said. "I have only one question."

He turned around at the bottom step and looked her square in the eye. "Yes?"

"Once his lordship accepts his birthright, helps me fight Vastos, and then returns to his normal way of life, how is it that he will find the woman with whom he will sire an heir?" She couldn't help asking. Mayhap there was a fleeting chance for her?

"Oh, the task is simple."

She raised an eyebrow in question.

"As Lord Protector, Donovan will be able to lay with only one woman—his soul mate. The gods have deemed it so. Once he accepts his birthright, his desires will be solely for the woman whom the gods have picked for him."

"And who will that be?"

"I am not privy to such knowledge. From what I do know, the woman has already been chosen by the gods, and she, like Donovan, is of ancient Celtic blood, a royal to be precise."

"I see." So he would probably have to bed a fellow Itycan, Icení thought. The notion of an Itycan marrying an Itycan made sense to her. Unfortunately, that was something she was not. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

Simpson's answer put a dead halt to any possible desires she could have wished for between her and Donovan. She had no reason now to worry about her heart's feelings. The man couldn't reject her if she was never a prospective match.

"Oh," Simpson said, tapping his slightly pursed lips with his forefinger. "I just remembered one other fact about Donovan's future bride."

"What?"

"She is rumored to be a quasi." He turned and strolled away, whistling, in the opposite direction from the stairs.

Icení swore an oath under her breath. If her memory served her correctly, she was the last known quasi to hail from an ancient Celtic line allied to the vampire. There were other female quasíes in existence, but none remained of the ancient lines. Of course, her father had sided with the Upyran realm, a fact in itself that assured her she had no Itycan blood in her veins. A royal Itycan vampire she was not, so she couldn't be the quasi to whom Simpson referred.

Icení let out a deep breath and relaxed, chiding herself for worrying like a sick fool. She'd just secured her way into Vastos's world and would do a good deed in the process. Her heart's desires should play no part in the present situation.

Leaving the steps, she returned to the portrait gallery. If she had to remain in Dublin to help the Protectorate, she had better make the best of her time, and learning more about Donovan seemed like a good manner in which to whittle away the hours. She worked her way around the room, making sure to avoid the portrait of the larger-than-life Bramwell Bat. Something in the creature's eyes continued to cause her distress.

Nearing the door, she studied a portrait of a beautiful woman dressed in a long robe-like gown. The caption under the painting stated the picture had been painted in the likeness of Caragh Bramwell, mother to Donovan, and member of a certain Celtic tribe.

Iceni looked back up at the portrait, her eyes drawn to the design dotting the fabric of Caragh's gown. A small gold insignia faded into the material's weave. Iceni tried identifying the mark, but she couldn't clearly make out the intricate design. She looked back at the caption but the small plaque served only to frustrate her further. A worn spot marred the letters, stating the woman's heritage. Iceni let out a sigh and ran her fingers over the faded letters. All that remained of the tribe's name were a half faded E and an N. Two other letters looked as if they were purposely shaved off of the metal, one before the E and one after the N.

"My lady?" Simpson said, interrupting her thoughts. "Come, it is time to leave for Bramwell Abbey. The council gathers there at this very moment and they await your presence."

"So soon? How do they even know about me?" She followed Simpson out of the gallery.

"The council knows just about everything there is for them to know. They've only erred once in the last eighteen-hundred years."

The notion of meeting the Protectorate council stirred her blood. Icení thanked the gods for having given her such good fortune tonight. If only she could find her necklace, she'd feel even more thankful and more at ease.

Making her way toward the back of Donovan's house, Icení followed Simpson out into the back courtyard and to a waiting carriage. She ran her hand over the large gold and red insignia of a fancy capital B flagged by unfurled bat wings, perched on the coach's door. A chill ran down her spine. This was no longer her favored world of a single quasi living the life of a nomad.

As she entered the black coach, a sense of finality hit her in the deepest depths of her soul. Somehow, Icení knew that after tonight her world would never be the same again.

Chapter Seven

Donovan tossed and turned, dark worlds filling his mind. He'd been drugged and taken against his will. He tried to sort out the blurred visions swarming inside his head. His mind faded in and out of consciousness until he once more gave into the deep sleep that overcame his body...

He sensed it in the night air, the cold, eerie presence of an entity older than time. He sensed it making its way back into man's world. From within the shadows, within the moonlight, around every bend and finally within his own soul, Donovan Bramwell sensed the powerful being now stirring his own world of sleep. The odd sensation sent a chill down his spine.

Stepping inside the sacred circle, Donovan entered the earthen ring and took a deep breath. An arc of fiery torches illuminated his surroundings. He tossed back the hood of his cape. A shadowy figure dressed in a long, black cloak stood before him, and he asked the figure, "Why have you called me here?"

Silence stalked him like a hawk to its prey.

Donovan sensed nothing from the dark being, yet a vague familiarity stirred his soul. "Who are you?"

Again, no words came. The chilling silence unnerved Donovan.

Flashes of his father's brutal murder haunted his mind. Suddenly, he was ten and five again, standing on the ancient battlefield. Raising his hands to his temples, Donovan grasped his head and winced. The pain of a thousand shrieking voices

echoed in his ears. Life had returned to his father's people. Their voices, as pained now as ever, cried for mercy.

Thick, warm blood pooled at Donovan's feet. The sticky liquid seeped between his bare toes, wrapping around his flesh like a red colored cocoon. He traced the river of blood with his eyes, the oozing trail winding back to his father's lifeless corpse.

A dark lord stood over the limp body. Sharp, jagged fangs flashed from beneath the man's black hood.

Now Donovan knew the reason for the familiar sense he felt in the nameless entity's presence. The being that now stood before him in the sacred circle was the same soul who had killed his father.

The haunting visions faded from his sight. Donovan let out a deep breath, and then dropped his hands from his head.

He stared at the entity standing with him in the circle and again asked, "Why have you brought me here?"

The dark soul stepped forward, but still remained silent. A white flash illuminated the darkened night.

Suddenly, the dark lord turned into a blurred shadow and swooped down upon Donovan's neck. His flesh tore, ripped apart by sharp jagged fangs.

Vastos!

The name echoed eerily in his head, engulfing his every sense until all that was left was an empty feeling of nothingness.

Donovan woke on the instant, gasping for air and his hand clenched to his neck. Ragged gasps marred his breathing and salty beads of sweat teased his lips. A torturous pain

throbbed in his head. He opened his eyes and saw nothing but a blurry flash of gray shadow. He squinted and his eyes slowly adjusted to the chamber's dim light, allowing for a brief search of his surroundings. He hadn't had that dream in ages. He swallowed hard, his mouth dry.

From the looks of things, his late grandfather's henchmen had brought him to Bramwell Abbey, the place that amounted to nothing more than the dreaded tomb he'd hated all his life. Here his world had no meaning, no emotion. Bramwell Abbey had been home to the Protectorate for almost two thousand years, and all that he remembered of it were cold, uncomfortable visits with his grandfather. Anger rose in his soul.

Donovan let out a deep sigh that resonated somewhere between a moan and a guttural howl. The dark blood churning in his veins didn't like being in this place. He'd never had an easy go of it here, but the present pain inflicting his body from Vastos's bite cut through him like a sharp stake, pricking his skin and piercing his heart. In all his days, he had never experienced anything even close to this severity of pain.

He raised a hand to his head and pressed his fingers firmly against his right temple. It didn't surprise him that his grandfather's men had brought him here, but he was a bit curious as to why they would confine him to the underground chambers. He pressed his fingers deeper against his temple. The pain eased, leaving only a dull ache pulsing in his head.

He pulled himself up and, with great effort, threw his legs over the side of the bed. His bare feet skimmed the tile floor.

A cold chill shot up through his body, touching the edge of his soul. He shivered. The room's damp, crisp air wrapped itself around his skin like a mummy's casing, hampering his movements. His joints ached with each inch he moved, and in various places upon his body, he bore bruises from the night attack. He ran his right hand over his left arm, his fingers rubbing the bubbled scar where he'd been cut. Then the realization dawned on him. He was naked. The notion caught him off guard, and he cursed to himself. Not only had he been taken under the cover of night and against his will, but he had been stripped of his clothing as well.

Rising from the bed, he surveyed the chamber. A dim, eerie glow lit the space, cast by a row of blazing torches. Shadows danced hauntingly upon the room's gray, lifeless, walls. The chamber sat empty, save for the four-poster bed and a full-length mirror. Donovan noted his clothes were nowhere in sight. He also suddenly noted a second presence in the room.

The sensation of being watched caused the hair at the nape of his neck to stand on end. A familiar essence shook his soul.

Iceni.

Slowly, he turned around, suddenly far more aware of his nakedness than a moment before. He hadn't minded it when she broke into his bedroom at Henrietta Street. He'd undressed solely to unnerve the woman. Despite the fact that Iceni had been the one to intrude into his home, he had been in complete control of the situation. Considering he was now

the captive creature, his nakedness made him feel uncomfortable.

He eyed the bed. At the foot of the drape decked four-poster stood the one woman who set his nerves on end and she did so in more ways than one, especially where his penis was concerned. His growing erection annoyed him. He cursed to himself again. Even in his present, vulnerable position, he vowed silently that despite his sudden longings for Icení, such a woman would remain unknown to him until he had confirmed her true sincerity. But Icení only served to further set his mind and body at odds. The notion perplexed him. She might be Vastos's spy, and longing for a woman who might lead him to his greatest enemy didn't sit well with him. He'd have to concentrate extra hard to keep his base desires in check.

He stared at her, unable to stop himself from assessing the bewitching beauty he had thought about everyday for centuries. Unfortunately for him, the girl he'd believed he had failed to save had now grown into a beguiling woman. Her black hair sat pinned in a high crown at the top of her head, trimmed in ringlets of curls that framed a face more perfect than Venus's. He knew no other woman to compare to such beauty than the goddess. Nor did any other ever compare in body. The sheer gown draping Icení's shapely form did little to conceal her sensual curves. It also did little to aid Donovan in his struggles concerning his desire for her.

He cursed to himself for a third time and asked, "Did you help them bring me here?"

Iceni approached him. Her gaze raked his body from head to toe and then back up again. She met him eye to eye. "I am not here by choice, my lord. It appears both of us are in a similar quandary."

"Then, pray tell," said Donovan. "How is it that you and I have become imprisoned together?"

She looked away, hesitating. "That fact is of no true concern to you."

"I'd beg to differ, my lady."

Iceni lifted her gaze to him once more, a pleading look veiling her face. "What matters most is that we help each other."

"I do not help my enemies."

"So you do think me a spy!"

Having shared such thoughts only with his valet, Iceni's words shocked him. At least he now knew where Simpson's true loyalty lay. And to think, after all these years of employment, the man had violated his trust.

"I assure you I am not a spy," she said before he could respond. "The Lord Protector is the only being who can help me avenge the murders of my tribes' people," she told him

Donovan let out a soft laugh. So now the woman planned to force him into accepting his birthright. Simpson was good, very good, Donovan thought. In truth, he hadn't expected to find such a cunning sense in the man.

Donovan walked back to the bed and pushed aside the coverlet. From beneath it, he tugged a white sheet free, pulling it off the bed and wrapping it around his waist. Draping his body in bed linens was becoming a bit annoying.

"What else did Simpson convince you to do? Seduce me? Agree to carry my child?"

Iceni said nothing, but a look of both shock and hurt crossed her face.

Donovan stared at her. He'd known many women over the years, but none had ever come to him in this manner. Usually they wanted only one thing from him. Both mortal and vampire alike had cared solely for his name and the elite position it carried in proper society. But Iceni wanted something different. She came to him because she believed in him. She saw the same soul his father had seen. And in an odd way, that made him feel whole again, like he was once more the worthy, powerful being capable of leading the Protectorate, the person his father believed him to be.

"How do you plan on besting Vastos?" he asked.

She paced the floor in front of the mirror, her dim, yet still quite visible silhouette crisscrossing the glass. "He stole an amulet belonging to my father. The ancient relic contains within its core the powers of the last Ceni tribe. By taking it back, I'll be stripping away a very significant amount of the dark lord's powers."

"But the Ceni amulet is a triplicate gold piece. And you have only one third."

Iceni's lips parted as if she were in shock. On the instant, Donovan knew he had said too much.

"How do you know I only have one third?"

"I simply do. Now answer my question, and don't ask of me that which I cannot tell you."

She didn't question him. And her silence pleased him. An Upyran spy would have dug for the answer, hoping to find the second part of the amulet for her master.

"Who gave Vastos the relic?"

Iceni froze in front of the mirror. "No one. He took it." She swallowed hard, a white pallor washing her skin. "I remember the day well. I was ten and two, and a rather short, thin child. The Roman's invaded my father's home. I hid in a secret compartment under the floor of my father's council chamber. My sisters weren't as lucky. Through the slits in the wood, I witnessed their rapes and vicious murders. When night fell, I lifted the door and found only a dozen or so Ceni still alive. All of them were children younger than me. I tried to save them. We ran for days, but every village we came upon within my father's realm had been burned and the inhabitants killed. Finally, the Upyrans and the Romans found our trail. I could no longer protect the children. I told them to go in different directions, hoping that at least some of them would survive."

A steady stream of tears flowed from her eyes, and Donovan felt her pain. She was more like him than she could ever imagine, and he wondered how she had survived on her own all these years. At least, had he chosen them, he still had the Protectorate to fall back on. Iceni had no one. Donovan crossed the room and reached for her. He pulled her close to him, wrapping his arms about her shoulders, hoping to comfort her in some way. Her uneven breaths fanned his bare chest.

"Why come to me?" Donovan asked softly when her tears finally stopped. "I, too, have failed my people, and as a Ceni,

I am sure you are well aware of that. Your father was allied to the Upyrans, but your mortal mother wasn't. She turned to the Itycans for your protection, and we failed you all."

Iceni raised her head and pulled slightly away from Donovan. "I saw you that day, in the forest just off the battlefield. You attempted to give your life for me. Any other boy would have led Vastos right to me. I know what that bastard was capable of and I was the one being he was after that day, not you. Maybe another time he'd have wanted you, but not at that moment. His Dead Walkers had been chasing me for several days. While hiding from them I overheard their conversations. And yet, because of you distracting Vastos, I was allowed to escape."

He froze. The girl had indeed been saved. A sudden sense of relief filled his every nerve. Donovan stared down into Iceni's tear-damp eyes. He ran the pad of his thumb across her cheeks, wiping away the tears.

"I trust no one but you," she said.

"I thought Vastos had captured you, taken you as he did all the others."

She shook her head. "It was one of the other children. The Roman's had laid out a net and one of the other Ceni girls walked into it. I froze in fear and did nothing. I let them take her, thinking she was me."

"Do not blame yourself, Iceni," Donovan said as her tears began to flow again. "'Tis not your fault."

"How can I not blame myself? If I had somehow been able to take back the amulet at that time, maybe Vastos would not be terrorizing the mortal realm now. I have tracked the dark

lord since that day, and still his armies continue to assault the innocent. The Upyrans have long since been slave traders, even to this day."

"Slave traders?"

"Yes. That is why he captured the Ceni children. The Upyrans supplied slaves to Rome, the colonies in later years, and even the island plantations. Their business is a vast empire that stretches across man's world."

"And now? Are the Upyrans still dealing in the slave trade?"

"Of course," Icen said. "It is happening right here, on this very isle. Tenant farmers are being evicted from the lands they tend."

The thought of Conor's son came rushing back to Donovan. Mayhap there was still hope for the boy. "Tell me all you know about the Upyrans."

"They convince the lords of great estates that for a price they will see to it the tenant farmers are relocated and that such workers leave without incident."

"So, they are being paid to take their own slaves. How cunning."

"Some they turn, and some they feed on and then discard."

Icen's latest insight wasn't what he had wanted to hear. "They are all turned vampire or killed?"

"No," Icen said, shaking her head. "The children are unharmed. For some reason, the Upyrans haven't touched them. The guards take them to a large estate in the countryside, where Vastos has one of his earthly strongholds."

From what I have been told, the children are well kept. They are fed, clothed, even educated. If one didn't know better, it would appear Vastos is the epitome of the charitable lord."

Conor's son could still be alive, Donovan thought again. The notion pleased him, yet it worried him at the same time. Vastos wasn't known among the Vampyric world as a doer of good deeds, and the notion that the scoundrel had set up camp in the area was yet another blow to Donovan. How long would the dark lord continue his scheme? Or worse yet, did Vastos have an even more sinister motive? Mayhap he wanted to force the young children into becoming his next generation of Dead Walkers, turn them into creatures that walked on the dark side of life without giving them a choice. At least *he* teetered on the brink between man's world and the undead for the better sake of the mortal realm. Vastos's Dead Walkers only cared to destroy man, not save him.

A sharp pain sliced through his neck. Donovan leaned his head to one side and released his hold on Icení. Placing his hand just beneath his ear, he gripped hard with his fingers. The area Vastos had bitten grew hot and small bumps protruded against his palm.

"Donovan?"

"I'm fine." He pushed Icení away as the pain increased.

"You're bleeding." Icení reached for his hand.

He stepped back. "No, do not touch me, especially my blood." A cold splat hit the top of his foot. Donovan pulled his hand away from his neck and watched as several small streams of blood trickled over his knuckles and then down through the spaces between his fingers.

"It is Vastos, is it not?" Icení asked. A look of true concern crossed her face. "You have two bite marks. Donovan, what has he done to you?"

"This has nothing to do with Vastos. Just stay away." He couldn't tell her the truth; he *wouldn't*.

Within seconds, Donovan fell to the ground. The pain of his bare back slamming against the stone wall took his breath away.

Icení looked panicked. She lunged for the bed and clawed at the sheets, ripping a length off the top edge of the bed covering. Then she ran back to Donovan. "Here, use this to stop the bleeding."

"Leave it on the floor and back away." He had no idea what the dark blood would turn him into. After waiting for Icení to get far enough away, Donovan grabbed the folded fabric and raised it to his neck. His fingers pressed hard against the returning bite wounds. Warm, sticky liquid soaked the fabric held tightly against his skin. He prayed to the gods he wouldn't bleed to death. If he did, the vampires of the Protectorate would all die.

On the instant, Donovan's pain vanished. The blood stopped oozing from his neck, and the tiny bite mounds scarring his flesh sank back into hibernation. He pulled the cloth away from his skin and stared at the pristine white material. No trace of his blood marred the fabric. His fingers had dried as well. The crusty red lines of his blood had vanished into thin air.

A warning, Donovan thought. A severe warning sent from his greatest enemy. He needed to find Vastos more than ever

before. The dark lord was his only hope at finding a remedy for the vile blood that had tainted his veins for almost two thousand years.

He stared at Icení, now standing at an arm's distance from him. "Say nothing to no one. Do I make myself clear?"

She nodded, but remained silent.

Donovan sensed her fear of him. He wished more than anything he could tell her not to be afraid, but to do so could put her in jeopardy. "I will help you take back the Cení amulet from Vastos if you help me find a child who I think might be in the Upyrans care. Then we go our separate ways, keeping all of this to ourselves. Do we have an agreement?"

She parted her lips, but no words came out of her mouth.

Donovan didn't have time to waste. He probed Icení's mind, searching for an answer. What he found were thoughts he never expected. She feared him, yet she felt for him. He had to change that, had to make her see him for what he really was—a soul more dangerous than she could ever imagine, even in her wildest dreams.

"Do we have an agreement or not?" Donovan said, his voice sounding a bit harsh even to his own ears.

"Yes," Icení stammered.

"Good." He rose from the floor and headed toward the door. The wooden barrier had no latch, only a keyhole. Donovan swore an oath and pounded his fists against the wood. "Damn you Magnus, Simpson, and Higgins. Damn you all. Now let me out of here or I'll put an end to the Protectorate here and now."

He lied, but it was all he had. And the longer he was trapped at Bramwell Abbey, the longer Vastos had time to carry out his sordid schemes.

Chapter Eight

Iceni was seated on the bed, and Donovan waited at the far end of the room. Luther came to his rescue, unlocking the chamber door and handing him back his clothing in a neat, folded pile. "No hard feelings?"

Donovan offered his old friend a sly grin and grabbed his neck cloth, pants, shirt and boots. He noted that his black Hessians had been polished to a nice shine. "Impeccable as always," he commented.

Luther shrugged, his body leaning against the doorjamb. "It was the least I could do, considering my actions last night."

Of all the vampires in the entire Protectorate organization, Donovan trusted only one, the burly Hun from ancient Germania. "You are as much entangled in this mess as am I," he said, refusing to comment on his annoyance over last night. "And this time I fear there is no escape." He stepped behind the mirror and tossed out the sheet that had been his only saving grace in front of Iceni. With pants and shirt now covering his body, Donovan wandered back to the bed, sat down upon the mattress, and tugged on the black Hessians. He motioned with a nod of his head for Luther to step further into the room. "Holding a grudge benefits no one," he said.

The tall, hulking vampire entered the chamber and looked past Donovan's shoulder to the headboard behind him, giving Iceni a hungry glance and smiling wickedly at her.

A sudden pang of jealousy jarred Donovan. He didn't like the idea of his best friend staring at Icení. He rose from the bed and met Luther eye to eye. "We have some business to discuss."

"Your father made the right decision in agreeing with the gods' choice of a bride for you," Luther said in a whispered voice. "The girl turned out to be quite the woman, wouldn't you say?"

"Don't even think about it." Donovan pushed Luther back a step. "Icení has no idea about the gods' hands in this situation, and I intend to keep it that way. After I have finished dealing with several pressing issues, we have agreed to part company."

Luther raised an eyebrow, as if questioning the matter. "Tell me you're not leaving the Protectorate again, Donovan."

"I can't stay. Trust me on this, Luther. I know what is best for the organization."

"But you are the only soul who can lead us. Without you, turmoil will descend upon our world. The ancient prophecies detail unspeakable horrors. How can you abandon us?"

He wouldn't exactly call his decision abandonment. If Luther only knew about Vastos's bite, surely the man would agree with him. Donovan wondered what the mighty vampire would think of an Itycan king who carried tainted Upyran blood in his veins. He couldn't stay with the organization. When the dark blood turned him, he would become the one soul capable of completely annihilating the Protectorate. Leaving them without a doomed leader wasn't exactly abandonment.

"Don't argue with me, Luther," Donovan said. "I have more pressing matters to tend to at the moment. I'll deal with the organization when the time comes."

He turned back to Icení. "My lady..." He paused. The woman, with whom he had agreed to join forces, was in reality a Cení princess, the last of her tribe. She deserved a more fitting title, Donovan thought. "Your highness," he corrected. "I think it time you meet the Protectorate Council in a proper manner." He held out his arm.

Icení approached him and glanced at Luther. Donovan sensed a bit of apprehension in her mannerism. The tight grip she placed upon his arm gave him an almost comforting feeling. She trusted him over Luther. He liked her thinking he could protect her, even if he didn't exactly believe the same.

"He's nothing to fear," Donovan whispered. "Trust me on that matter." He offered her a playful wink and turned to face his old friend. "Your Highness, allow me to introduce to you to one of my oldest and dearest of friends, Luther von Brauer of ancient Germania."

"A pleasure to meet you, sir."

"The pleasure is all mine, your highness." Luther reached for Icení's hand and bowed slightly. "If ever you have need of anything, fear not, for I will come to your aid on the instant."

Donovan pulled Icení back a step, forcing Luther to relinquish his extended hold upon the woman's hand. He swore a mild oath to himself. What was happening to him? He'd never needed anyone or anything, and suddenly his mind—and body, for that matter—had become totally engrossed in the Celtic princess. He didn't like the feeling of

jealousy assaulting his senses. The sooner he was done with the tasks at hand, the better off he would be. The better off they'd all be.

He made his way past Luther, heading into the outer corridor of the underground chambers. Several floors above, in their usual meeting hall, the council assembled. Donovan knew convincing the elder vampires of his decisions wouldn't be an easy feat. But fate had left him with no other choice.

* * * *

Vastos leaned back against the leather seat in his coach and relaxed to the sound of his team of six horses galloping through the Irish countryside. The constant drone of wheels turning, intermingling with the thumping of horses' hooves, set a methodical beat streaming to his ears. And of all the things he enjoyed in life most, consistency ranked a high priority. He didn't need to think or worry about matters when they went according to plan. The matter at hand annoyed him. He only wished his nephew's blood would cooperate with his own. Donovan was supposed to be his salvation, the one soul deemed to give him back the chance to live life as a quasi. But something in the bite hadn't gone as planned. And now he had to endure the agony of finding a way to rid him of the horrendous pain that repeatedly boiled his blood.

The carriage slowed to a halt, and through the open window, he watched several servants pull back the large black and gold iron gates leading to the main road of one of his many earthly estates. Once the panels had been parted

wide enough for the carriage to pass through, the horses picked up their galloping pace.

Vastos eyed the mage sitting across from him. He hated having to travel with an alchemist, but his present health conditions forced him to always be accompanied by a mage familiar with Upyran herbal remedies.

The fire in his blood started again. Vastos leaned forward, gripping his midsection. The pain always began as a twisting in the core of his stomach, then spread throughout his body, gnawing like a hungry beast hunting on the prowl. He balled his hands into tight fists.

"My lord," the mage screamed.

"Leave me be!"

The mage knocked furiously upon the coach's inner roof, and the moving vehicle slowed, eventually coming to a complete stop. The head driver appeared at the window.

"Take us directly to the house," the mage shouted.

Vastos grunted. The infliction circulated through his bloodstream, causing the veins under his skin to grow large, almost bulging, as if his own blood had become too thick to pass through them. From his huddled position, he stared at the tops of his gloved hands. Large tubelike strips protruded from beneath the black leather and ran from his fingers up to his arms. He pulled at his gloves and tossed them to the floor. He almost didn't recognize his own hands. The pale skin was marred by engorged veins underneath, growing bluer by the moment. The intense contrast of color made his skin look more like a map highlighted by multiple rivers.

The mage reached across the carriage, placed his hands upon Vastos's shoulders and pushed forward.

Vastos fell back against his seat. "I won't forgo seeing the children or my earthly Vampyric wives."

"They both can wait, my lord. Your health is far more important."

"Maybe the wives," Vastos said through gritted teeth. "But not the children. You have no idea what it is like to have your childhood taken away from you. Take me to the children first."

"I assure you, your guards tend to them well enough. They are clothed, fed, housed and even educated. What more can an urchin need?"

Vastos lashed out at the mage with his fist, but his failing condition left him with little power. His hand met with open air and then descended back to his side, missing the mage's face completely.

"Make sure none of them are taken as slaves," he said. "I care not what happens to their parents, but the children must remain free."

"Once I have tended to you, my lord," the mage said, "I will send word to the head guard."

"And..." Vastos stammered, "they are not to be turned. Not a single one of them. Do I make myself clear?"

The mage nodded, continuing to hold Vastos in his seat.

Vastos took a deep breath, agony wracking his body. He had no idea why, all of a sudden, his blood was being tormented. He needed to get hold of the Ceni amulet before the worst came. He'd died once before, and he had no

intention of doing so ever again.

Chapter Nine

Magnus McKei sat at the head of the oblong table in the center of the chamber with five council members seated at even intervals on either side. Two empty chairs remained, one opposite Magnus, and the other closer to the middle of the table.

Donovan stood at the entrance to the room, staring in. A cold chill ran down his spine. Over the years, he had fought with the Protectorate elite often enough, but even as they prepared to accept him as their new king, his soul still sensed the invisible barrier erected ages ago between him and his council. Magnus offered him the typical unemotional glare from across the room, descending from the slipping spectacles teetering on the edge of his thin nose. The fight had already begun and he hadn't even said a word.

"They aren't exactly a friendly lot," Icení said.

"The council is made up of the wisest and most seasoned members of the Protectorate, one mortal and six vampires, souls who know the agony of war firsthand," Donovan answered. "At times there are more council members, and some days less. The exact number of members depends on the task at hand. I am afraid their concern for the organization and for the mortal realm, based on their own experiences, is more on the extreme level. But without them we have nothing. With the amount of Dead Walkers existing on the wrong side of life, man would be more vulnerable than

anyone could ever dare imagine." He paused, easing Icen's arm from his. "I do not blame them for their tense state."

He escorted Icen to a vacant chair in the hall just to the right of the chamber door. "I'll need some time to tell them about our joint cause."

"Of course." She stared up at him, a faint hint of fear draped in her deep blue eyes.

Icen trusted him when she needed to, but only because she had to, Donovan reminded himself. But he knew she feared the monster that dwelled inside him. He sensed her apprehension again.

A mallet hammered against the table and sent an echoing crack throughout the hall. Donovan took one last look at Icen, and then he turned on his heel and headed into the council chamber. The large gilt doors closed behind him, sending a thud resonating through the air.

He took a deep breath and approached the table. Luther remained standing, as usual, leaning against an arched windowpane across the room.

The long chamber, with its pointed glass roof and metal arches, reminded Donovan of the cold abbey he had been sent to ages ago while his father battled the Romans. The reminder of the event didn't sit well with him. He felt like that boy of five and ten again, stranded on an open battlefield, his enemy hiding in the shadows.

"We regret the manner in which we were forced to bring you here, my lord," Magnus said, interrupting his thoughts. "It is our hope you will one day understand our actions."

Donovan took the empty seat at the far end of the table and sat down. The large, comfortable chair soothed his aching body. "Please," he said, motioning with his hands for the council members to sit. Luther remained standing.

"My lord," Magnus said. "There are several issues that need to be discussed."

"Then let us discuss them."

Magnus cleared his throat and moved about a pile of papers spread out in front of him. A nervous tremble seemed to encompass the man's hands. "Vastos has been seen in the vicinity," he said.

"And?"

Magnus hesitated. He pulled at the cuffs of his jacket and straightened his neck cloth. "We ... request your permission to send an army to track him and learn his plans."

"No," Donovan answered. The last thing he needed was for the Protectorate to learn of his present affliction. And if they managed to get too close to Vastos, he was certain they'd learn of his ailment. If the pain at his neck could send him crashing to his knees, then it probably did the same to Vastos. And an action like that would certainly cause suspicion among the Protectorate. He couldn't take the chance of them learning about his bite. "I will tend to Vastos on my own."

The council members turned in unison to face him, surprised looks crossing each of their severe faces.

"But my lord," Magnus said, "the task is an impossible feat for one soul to handle on his own, even for you."

He didn't need an army of Protectorate members skulking about, interfering in matters that did not concern them. He had to settle his own situation before the organization ever learned what Vastos had done to him. "What else do you have for me, McKei? Time is too precious to waste."

The council members said nothing, but Donovan was well aware of their thoughts. He eyed them one by one, sending each soul a daunting stare. They backed down. All save for Luther.

Donovan shot him an angry glare, but the stubborn vampire did nothing to suppress his opposing thoughts. Despite the annoyance of the situation, at least Donovan knew where he stood with his old friend.

"Magnus?" he said, returning his gaze to the leader of the group.

The vampire fumbled with a set of papers. "We believe Vastos is here to find the soul who carries the blood of both realms within his veins. The ancient prophecies are coming into fruition, but not as we had interpreted them."

"No, that would be obvious, for I have still not taken a wife and sired an heir. The soul whom we all believed would be the one to unite the two Vampyric kingdoms." The misjudgment of the prophecies on the council's part disturbed Donovan. He knew the organization to err in their dealings with man, but those mistakes were excusable. Man never acted predictably, especially when influenced by the powers of unseen realms. To err in the interpretations of the gods' words, however, was a grave mistake. They now faced two enemies, one known and one unnamed.

"A leader is needed to guide us in this situation, my lord."

Donovan held his breath and slowed his heart. He cleared his mind of all thoughts save for the one now at hand. He had to be totally convincing to pull off a feat so great. Magnus had the capabilities to search his mind, probe the outer regions of his thoughts. But on this account, Donovan could take no chance of being found out. "I accept my birthright."

A sigh of relief escaped several council members.

Magnus pushed his spectacles back to their proper resting place at the bridge of his nose and leaned forward, his elbows just barely touching the edge of the table. "Why confront Vastos on your own, when you control an entire army trained specifically for said purpose?"

Now came the real test. Donovan tugged at the knot in his neck cloth and loosened the fabric. He needed to assert himself before the council or he'd never be free to do what had to be done. "I have a personal agenda in the matter."

"Such as?"

"I believe Vastos is taking slaves. It's rumored he has gathered several families of evicted tenant farmers and taken them to a safe house somewhere in the countryside. I am searching for a child who may or may not be among them."

Magnus sat back in his chair. He toyed with one of the gold buttons on his blood-red waistcoat. "This is a mortal matter."

"No," Donovan said. "It is a Protectorate concern. The Upyrans are not being truthful to the lords who own the lands these people work. Then, they are taking the evicted tenants as slaves. The Upyrans are the sole enemy here, turning the minds of man, just as they did back during the Roman

Empire. Mayhap they even expand their Dead Walker legions by turning innocent mortals on to the darker side of life. The Upyrans are known for using an assortment of tricks to entice humans to join their ranks."

"Then an army must be sent," Magnus said

"No army goes until I have confirmed our suspicions." Magnus pushed Donovan's patience to the very edge, and he didn't like it one bit.

"You put your life in danger, therefore, you put the Protectorate in danger," Magnus replied

Donovan focused his attention on Luther.

The yet silent vampire stepped forward, approaching the council. "I believe Donovan is correct in this matter. We do not want to rile Vastos if the rumors are not true. Doing so would only serve to further antagonize the already poor relations between the two kingdoms, and that could cause great grief to man."

Magnus shifted in his chair, a look of annoyance crossing his face. "And if they are true?"

"Then I am sure our Lord Protector will return to the Protectorate and gather an army. He is not a fool."

Luther's words hit Donovan hard. He knew damn well his only ally was informing him not to play games with the organization ... or with him. He sensed Luther didn't appreciate being kept in the dark.

"There is also the matter of the Celtic princess Icení," Donovan said. He shifted the conversation in a new direction, hoping to take some of the focus away from his plans about Vastos.

Mumbled voices echoed in the chamber. Several council members conferred in whispers, the mention of Icení's name apparently stirring their concern.

Magnus eyed Donovan from the far end of the table. "We are well aware of the Princess's plight and are more than prepared to aid her cause."

"Good," Donovan said. "Because she knows the location of the Upyran safe house where the tenant farmers are being held. She will accompany me on my journey there."

Magnus bolted from his chair and pounded his fists against the table. "Never!"

Donovan rose from his seat. "My word is final. And no god or council can overrule me."

"She is to be your wife. How can you think of endangering the woman? Have you no heart, Donovan?"

He had heart all right, more than any of the council members would ever know. But if he left Icení in the Protectorate's care, he knew the woman would find a way to meet Vastos on her own. "She broke into my house and managed to slip past my guards, my servants, and Simpson. No soul in this room, or in the entire organization for that matter, can stop the woman. At least by being at my side, she will be protected."

Magnus backed down and returned to his chair, and the other council members nodded in apparent agreement with Donovan.

"Forgive me, my lord," Magnus said. "I had forgotten my place." The lanky vampire adjusted his spectacles once more,

his long, tapered fingers pushing against the thin metal rim centered in the middle.

Donovan knew that when all was said and done, leaving the Protectorate was going to be harder than he had anticipated. For far too long, Magnus had been his grandfather's right-hand man, a position of which the ancient soul definitely needed to be relieved. "You are a loyal vampire, Magnus," Donovan said. "Despite our differences, I understand your views. But I have no choice in the matters at hand. They must be dealt with in the manner of which I spoke."

Magnus offered him a concerned stare. For the first time in all the years he had known Magnus, Donovan finally felt as if they had seen eye to eye on a matter. Donovan had no idea what the reasons were behind such a revelation. But at present, he'd take whatever cooperation the council offered him.

Magnus rose from his seat and then fell to his knees. "As the gods are my witness, as I have done for every Lord Protector since my turning, I pledge my soul, my life, in your stead, should such a time ever come."

"No." Donovan's voice rang out like that of the piercing sound of a bat's call. "No soul shall ever be taken in my stead. Is that clear?"

He eyed the council members still seated at their stations.

Magnus looked up at him. "But my lord, if you die, we all die. Without an heir, the realm ends with you."

And if he lived, if the dark blood in his veins turned him to the Upyran cause, all life would die. He offered Magnus a

hand and helped the vampire to his feet. "You did not take my grandfather's place when death called upon him. Why do so for me?"

Magnus swallowed hard, and a nervous tremble shook his hands and body. "Ask me not of this matter, my lord, for my soul has been sworn to secrecy."

Donovan didn't know what to say, how to react, to such a revelation. He leaned in close, pulling Magnus within inches of him. "I think it better that my formal acceptance of my birthright be announced after I have settled the matters at hand and we have had the chance for a long talk, Magnus McKei."

Magnus nodded and pulled away from Donovan. "As you wish, my lord." He wiped his hands upon his waistcoat. Trickle of sweat ran down his face from the edge of his forehead to his chin.

The man was a complete mess, Donovan thought, but he had no choice in leaving the Protectorate in Magnus's care. He studied the council members remaining at the table and, one by one, scanned their minds, mesmerizing them for several seconds. Once he was certain they were transfixed on some unimportant blank thought, he turned to Luther and joined the vampire by the windows where he had returned to stand.

"Magnus must be watched. By the ancient laws, even I cannot strip a Celtic quasi from leading the council without a proper trial. And at the moment I've no time for such nonsense. The safety of the organization is to be in your hands in my absence. If anything happens to the Protectorate while I'm gone, it will be your head I come looking for."

Luther nodded. "Then I'll make certain to keep Magnus out of trouble. After several thousand years, I've come to like my head. And when the end times come, I've no intention of losing my head to you."

He grinned. "For a Germanian, you certainly have a good sense of humor."

"I try my best," Luther said. "It's what has gotten me through all these years. Now, what about your Ceni princess?"

"I don't think now is the right time for Iceni to be properly introduced to the council," he said. "My situation with Vastos also concerns the Ceni people. I do not need the council interfering in the matter."

"Where will you go?"

"To start, Dun Sidhe. If you need me, find me there. I will spend the night preparing for my journey, and then I will depart on the morrow, at dusk."

Luther reached out a hand and grabbed Donovan's shoulder. "May the gods watch over you, my friend. And although you have never favored them, I'm afraid they are all you have now."

Chapter Ten

Iceni entered the waiting carriage outside Bramwell Abbey. A team of four horses neighed at the front, causing her to jump at the sudden sound. Iceni didn't like being without her Ceni charm. Her quasi powers were nowhere near the height of their potential without the protection of the old relic's magic. The charm had to be somewhere inside Donovan's house, but now she was beginning to wonder if she'd ever find it again. The unsettling thought disturbed her.

Donovan stepped up into the carriage and sat down beside her. The heat from his body's nearness warmed her. She'd never desired a man like she did Donovan. But after seeing the monster that ruled his soul, she knew he could turn on the instant. And she had no idea how far his darkness could take him.

He reached for her hand. "You are cold."

"It is the damp air, nothing more." She turned away from him, staring out the open window, her eyes wandering over the vast, rolling lawns. The breathtaking beauty of Ireland's rich landscape had long ago made a lasting impression on her mind's eye, even in the darkness. She didn't know how anyone could chose to live in a crowded city as opposed to the vast openness of the countryside.

"The grounds at Dun Sidhe are even more breathtaking," Donovan said. "You haven't seen true green until you have seen the hills around it."

He'd done it again. The irascible rogue had read her mind, her most private thoughts, and she didn't like being that vulnerable around him. Yet, at the same time, she had an insane longing to be able to share such intimate parts of herself with him. The colliding emotions frustrated her.

Donovan apparently sensed her uneasiness, for he rose from his seat and slouched down into the vacant space across from her.

A sudden sense of loss overcame her soul. Sighing, she ignored the foolish notion. When the carriage started to move down the pebble lined drive outside Bramwell Abbey, she wrapped her arms around her body as the air grew colder.

Donovan offered her his coat and she took it. The heavy wool garment warmed her skin. She needed a change of dress, but she'd brought none with her. When devising her original plan to entice Donovan into helping her, she never thought she'd be zigzagged across the isle. She promised herself that she would be better prepared for the next venture than she had been for the present one.

She wriggled her toes inside her silk slippers. Cold, damp stockings scrunched against her feet, bunching in stretched out folds and dangling over the inner edge of the pink and black silk shoes. "Bloody hell!"

Donovan shot her a surprised glance.

"I've worn a hole in my slippers. I can feel the bottom of the carriage." She lifted her gown and frowned at the dirt-scuffed foot coverings. Leaning forward, she ran her fingers over the tops of her slippers, rubbing and dusting, trying desperately to remove as much dirt as possible. But her

attempt was futile. The stains and scuffs remained. She sighed.

The sudden sense of being stared at heated her soul, and she raised her eyes only to find Donovan's ogling gaze firmly fixed upon her exposed bosom. She looked away, her eyes now drawn to the gaping neckline showing off what she considered to be two of her best assets. She tugged at the back of her gown, pulling the ribbon edged neckline closer to her body, and then she leaned back in her seat and said nothing.

"At Dun Sidhe, Simpson will tend to your every need," Donovan said, his voice gruff, yet cold. "I am sure he can find you another pair of slippers."

"These were my favorite," she said with a sigh. The chill between herself and Donovan had grown colder than the outside temperatures, and if she didn't do something about it fast, the situation would only get worse. "I am grateful for your help, Donovan. You have no idea how many times I have managed to get myself in suds in the past."

"We all make mistakes."

"Mayhap I try too hard. I keep telling myself the past is gone, let it go, but my heart seldom listens to my head."

"I do think your cause a most admirable one. The Ceni have a right to be avenged."

Donovan turned his gaze away from her, concentrating instead on the passing landscape of the Irish countryside.

She watched her newfound savior in silence. The man's straight, jet-black hair gracefully swayed across his forehead in the gentle wind ruffling in from the window. Without his

coat, Icení noted his sinewy muscles were even visible through his shirt and waistcoat. She had known he was a tall, well-defined specimen of the opposite sex, having seen him on more than one occasion without clothes. But the realization that his well-worked muscles could be defined through the heavy threads of a brocade waistcoat took her by surprise.

A tick jumped at his jaw, and she traced the edge of his face with her gaze. High cheekbones, a defined chin, a straight, thin nose. If she didn't know better, she would have sworn the man had been carved from a perfect piece of stone, a true work of art. Her eyes wandered to his lips. The thin top lip and its full, slightly protruding counterpart enticed her. She wondered what it would be like to feel Donovan's lips upon her own, to feel the sear of his kiss, the touch of his tongue. The notion sent a tingle straight through her, from her head to her toes, and then back up again, taking rest at the apex between her thighs. She imagined such perfection would feel like heaven and hell mixed into one. The unladylike thoughts shook her soul.

Donovan curved his lips into a half smile, and she blushed. Was he reading her mind again? Did he know what she was thinking? She sighed and sank deeper into the carriage's red leather seat.

Donovan slouched to his left, his body falling into a more relaxed position, and he slept.

A sense of relief flooded Icení's mind. Mayhap he hadn't read her thoughts after all.

The last rays of dusk edged the sky, sending out a breathtaking orange and yellow glow. Despite the day's earlier clouds, the night woke to a clear sky. Icení thanked the gods for giving her the ability to witness such beauty. She only wished she could see the full effects of daylight, but even the strongest of her people, save for her father when he wore the full Cení amulet, were not able to bear full sun. Dusk, the very early dawn, and dim, overcast days were all she had ever known. If she did manage to pull together the complete relic, she would treasure the sight of daylight, even if it meant watching from under the shade of a large tree. The thought of that simple pleasure pleased her. If only all of life were as easy.

A bump in the road rattled the carriage, but Donovan remained slouched in his seat, his eyes closed, knowing it was better to let Icení think him asleep than know the illicit thoughts that pervaded his mind. The very first sight of her bare calf, when she concerned herself with those dratted slippers, and the full view of her ample breasts had sent him over the edge. The fire in his groin caused him more than a fleeting bit of discomfort. If it were up to him, he would have the woman in his arms at this very moment, her delicate round bum planted firmly in his lap. The vision of Icení's barely dressed body so close to his own flesh further ignited his desires. The woman was surely going to be the death of him.

He made a mental note to have Simpson retrieve a wardrobe of printed cotton gowns for her, and not a single sheer style like the one she'd come to him in. Leave it to the

bloody frogs to dress their women in sheer fashions. What the devil were they thinking? Surely it had to be a woman who designed the barely-there dresses, a hellcat feigning innocence, when all the while her fellow females were very much aware of the situation they inflicted upon the opposite sex. And now he had become a victim of this unnamed dressmaker.

Visions of Icení's bare, curvy body lying beneath him in his bed came flooding back to him. Even if Simpson did send for cotton dresses, Donovan knew the damage had already been done. No amount of fabrics and laces could stifle his thoughts of her smooth skin, her firm, ample breasts, and her long legs. Devil be damned. One way or another, he would settle this misery at Dun Sidhe and be done with it. Mayhap Simpson could rustle up a stiff, burlap sack. Yes, that was the answer. A gown with no shape, no give to highlight Icení's curves. That or a very heavy silver lock, dripping in holy water, sealing him in a room with a door draped in garlic, keeping him far away from the beguiling Icení. The two visions collided in his mind. As his mind slowly drifted off to sleep, Donovan decided he would be better off with the latter.

* * * *

Vastos downed a second dose of the mage's horrendous concoction of herbs and then grunted. He hated the foul tasting liquids needed to rejuvenate his blood.

A cold, yet soft hand caressed his forehead, and Vastos handed the now empty glass back to his mage and then looked up at his dark-haired wives. He wondered how wicked

the three women would be had he been allowed to bring them to live with him in the Upyran realm. He imagined that in a Vampyric world, his wives would thrive as curious, wild creatures. But because his mother's laws allowed for royals to marry only other Upyran gentry, his mortal brides, whom he had turned vampire, were not welcome in his world. Nor were they recognized.

"It has been a long time since you visited us, Vastos," Isabella said.

"We have missed you," Ophelia cried.

"We have been lonely," Pandora commented.

He stared at them, scanning their minds, searching for the degree of sincerity in their words. He found little. "Have my hellcats been behaving?"

Isabella ran a thin finger down the contours of his face. "More than you can ever imagine, my lord. We have slept for long days, awaiting your return."

Pandora gave him a soulful glance. Her dark eyes longing. "Sleep has made us restless, my lord. Will you not satisfy our hunger?"

If only all his servants were as obedient as his wives, Vastos thought, his life would be so much easier. His mind wandered back to the children. He wondered how long his brides could go without feeding. "Have you left the children alone?"

The three long-haired women nodded in unison.

He liked it when they obeyed him. If only he could exert as much control in Upyra. He turned to his wives, motioning for the women to come closer. "As a reward for your good

behavior, I have decided to give you a treat. A delectable morsel I am sure will satisfy even the greatest of your cravings."

The women clawed their way to the top of the bed, their flowing robes billowing around their thin, lanky frames. They settled themselves around Vastos, each of them stroking his body at various places.

"I am expecting guests. I want each of you to be on your best behavior and refrain from showing yourselves. If you abide by my orders, I promise a delectable treat in the end."

"Mortal or vampire?" Ophelia asked.

"Quasi," Vastos said. "A Celtic princess."

Isabella licked her lips. "You have never brought us a quasi before. Why now?"

He laughed wickedly. "I will have no need of her body once my guards have taken her heart. You, my precious little hellcats, can have the woman's blood."

The three wives leaned forward, each placing kisses upon his face and body. He enjoyed their adoration, their attention. Even if it was only when he gave them something. His other slaves never gave him that much.

Vastos sat back and waved a hand at his mage, dismissing the man from his post. The thought of pleasing his women satisfied him. He wondered what the Celtic princess would say when she eventually encountered the children she had tried to save and found them now as vampire and as his brides. The dark scene played out in his mind, scorching his soul, heating up his base desires. He thanked the dark gods he had three wives, for even in his failing state, he still hadn't lost his

taste or his abilities for the sport of sex.

Chapter Eleven

The carriage came to a jarring halt. Donovan woke on the instant, a stiffness inflicting his neck and upper back. He shifted in his seat, suddenly aware of yet another stiff part of his body, the heated area of his groin. He cursed to himself. He hadn't meant to actually fall asleep during the ride to Dun Sidhe. His last coherent thought of Icení's body draped in a sheer gown reminded him of the severity of getting Simpson to find a new dress for the woman. Donovan reached his arms above his head and stretched, the muscles in his body welcoming the feel-good vibrations pulling at their end points.

"Did you sleep well?" Icení asked.

A cautious voice in his head warned him not answer truthfully. He hadn't traveled with a companion in ages, let alone a woman. And forgetting himself by falling asleep in Icení's presence wasn't a good sign. He hated the fact that he had managed to relax so in her company. He sighed silently to himself. The notion of waking in Icení's presence both pleased him and unsettled him. He looked across the carriage compartment and flashed a faint smile in the moonlight. "I did not sleep as well as I would have in a bed," he lied. With Icení so near, a bed would have been worse, for he would never have been able to resist her charms.

The door swung open, a footman standing to its side, and a servant hurried down the main stairs of Dun Sidhe. Amid night's deep silence, the clicking sound of his boot heels

tapping against the marble steps rang out like clashing swords in battle.

Donovan searched the area for Simpson, but the man was nowhere to be seen. The realization worried him. While he much preferred moving about in his world without all the pomp and ceremony of a Vampyric lord, sending the second best wasn't Simpson's style. He wondered what the clever valet was up to at the moment. Something in the depths of his soul told him Simpson had yet another card up his sleeve, one even worse than coercing Icení into his earlier scheme. Donovan frowned, but he said nothing to the young servant waiting for him to exit the carriage.

"Your highness," Donovan said, motioning with his hand for Icení to take her leave.

A liveried footman reached inside the carriage and offered Icení a helping hand in descending the few steps from the vehicle to the ground. Icení removed the jacket draping her shoulders and handed it back to Donovan.

Knowing full well the temperatures were now far colder than earlier in the evening, he started to protest, but the soft, rounded curve of Icení's bottom greeted his eyes. She descended with the utmost grace and the unnerving tease of the slightest sway of her hips.

Donovan coughed, his heart's erratic beat catching his breath. If she continued to toss him on end, he'd never have to fear Vastos, for Icení would kill him first.

"M'lord?" the young servant standing in Simpson's stead raised an eyebrow as he popped his head into the carriage. "May I be of any assistance?"

Assistance be damned, Donovan thought, if the man only knew his true thinking. He shook his head and exited the carriage in a huff. "Where is Simpson, Roger?"

"In the lady's chambers, m'lord." The young valet fussed with his crookedly tied neck cloth but he quickly desisted upon noting Donovan's glare.

Donovan laughed to himself. The young pup had a long way to go in the training department.

"Shall I inform Mr. Simpson of your arrival, m'lord?"

"No," Donovan said. "I will do so on my own." He made his way up the stairs, Icení at his side and Roger a close step behind.

Inside the entrance hall of Dun Sidhe, he led Icení up the main staircase. A thud from the closing doors echoed through the castle's cold, damp air.

"Despite its first impression of being a dank, stark building left over from Gothic days, Dun Sidhe is indeed a very homey place," Donovan said, something inside him wanting Icení to be comfortable here. "All the rooms are warmed by fireplaces, and the heated air is kept inside by large tapestries blocking any possible separation in the stone walls. If you enjoyed the portrait galleries at Henrietta Street, I believe you will find Dun Sidhe more than enchanting."

"I haven't had a true home since my father's realm was destroyed. I've come to appreciate even the smallest, barest spaces as places of comfort."

The notion sent a zing of pain through Donovan's heart. He didn't like the idea of Icení having to struggle, to think of all she had lost. Yet she still clung to the hopes of avenging her

people. She obviously never put herself first, but rather her tribe and the memories of her ancestors.

Donovan suddenly wanted to be the one to provide Icení with all the comforts she could ever crave, and the protection to keep those comforts. He wanted to make sure she never felt the loss of anything ever again. The idea unsettled his bachelor's heart, and he took a deep breath and cursed to himself. He had to keep his thoughts in check, especially his damned emotions. What was he thinking? Icení was not his to keep. After they found Conor's son and the Cení relic, she would part his company. And it would be for the better.

Icení followed Donovan up the stairs and onto the second story landing. A long corridor filled with alabaster statues and walls of endless tapestries greeted her eyes. Every so many steps a large green fern dotted the scenery. She'd never visited a place so regal, so elegant. If the man could manage to make the ruins of a Gothic fortress a home, she wondered what he could do with her abandoned heart. After she had witnessed the Roman's taking everything from her, she'd vowed to never get attached to any new souls. But Donovan was different. The irascible lord had a knack for making her imagine things of which she didn't dare dream, even in her wildest fantasies. Donovan had actually agreed to help her, and he'd opened his home and his resources to her. Somewhere in the deepest depths of her heart, she knew her soul could get used to an existence that included Donovan. But imagining eternity spent with Donovan Bramwell just couldn't be. She was a Cení, allied to the Upyrans, and Donovan needed to marry an Itycan bride.

The sound of a whistling voice disrupted her thoughts, and Donovan turned to her and placed a finger over his lips. She nodded, keeping silent.

Without making so much as a single noise, she followed her host past the next doorway and stopped at the open space, which led to a simple yet elegant bedchamber.

Apparently unaware of their company, Simpson stood in front of a tall, dark wood armoire, his long, suit-covered arms hidden behind numerous lengths of sheer fabrics and fancy trims. The man appeared to be in the midst of a losing battle against the items inside the armoire.

Donovan cleared his throat.

Simpson jumped. "My lord," he said, placing a suddenly free hand over his heart. "You startled me to hell and back."

"Forgive the intrusion, but her highness has been traveling for several hours now, and I think a short rest is needed."

"Of course."

Simpson inched away from the armoire, but he appeared to hesitate.

Iceni remained in the doorway, unsure of what to do next. The valet looked as if he was the cat that had just eaten the mouse.

Donovan stepped inside the room. "What the devil do you have there, man?"

"I assure you, my lord," Simpson said, his hands raised defensively. "I did only what I thought well."

"Step aside, Simpson."

The vampire valet obliged, and Donovan opened the armoire doors and froze. The flowing cloth of a wardrobe befitting a queen spilled free from the cherry wood cabinet.

Donovan turned to Simpson, and Icení watched in silence as the valet averted his master's stare and eyed the floor as he said, "If truth be known, this is nothing new."

"Meaning?"

Simpson raised the angle of his head, his eyes just falling short of Donovan's face. "Meaning I have filled wardrobes with the best fineries any lady would have envied since the bloody Roman invasion, hoping that whatever your current whim had been, it would be so with someone the gods had favored. I even once went so far as to purchase a MacDougal tartan."

"Guard your tongue, man, this is an Irish household."

Simpson raised an eyebrow. "Well, if I dare say, my lord, the way you cavorted with Lady MacDougal, I was certain..."

Donovan cut him off by gesturing a slice of his hand to his neck.

The valet eyed Icení standing in the doorway.

She looked away on the instant, not wanting to cause the man any further embarrassment.

"Forgive me," Simpson said. "I seemed to have forgotten my place."

"No need to apologize, Simpson." She didn't know what else to say.

"The dresses are for you, my lady. I had hoped, with my sincerest heart that Lord Bramwell would agree to join your

cause. And if so, I imagined you would have need of some additional clothing."

She sent him a soft smile, one she prayed would relieve a bit of the tension sparked in the room. "You judged well, Simpson. And for that I am most grateful."

"Do you have further need of my assistance, my lord?"

Donovan said nothing, offering only a shake of his head.

Simpson crossed the room and skirted past Icení. He dipped his head as he stepped over the threshold and entered the hall.

Donovan turned back to the wardrobe. He pushed several of the gowns and dresses to one side and bent his head. He reached down and withdrew a pair of pink slippers. "The man has always had a knack for being more precise than even the gods, bloody hell."

Icení entered the room and stared in awe at the slippers Donovan held in his hands. She'd never seen any so dainty, or more beautiful. Pink silk dotted with tiny black and gold appliqués cradled the area where a foot would rest, and two lengths of pink silk ribbon flowed free from either side of the shoes. She imagined the soft touch upon her feet. Even her favorite slippers had never been that delicate.

Donovan handed her the small, intricately decorated shoes and leaned against the side of the wardrobe.

She sighed. "My damp stockings will ruin such fine slippers."

"I am sure Simpson has thought of those as well."

Donovan didn't make any attempts to move from where he stood, and Icení stared at him, wondering what the man expected.

"Oh, right," he said, stepping away from the cherry cabinet. "I will have Simpson send a maid to draw you a bath and tend to whatever it is you need."

He motioned with his hands in a frenzied manner, and Icení laughed to herself. Seeing the powerful and strong Lord Protector suddenly blush caused her a bit of comical pleasure.

"I will go see what Cook can fetch for our meal," Donovan said. "He has the incredible ability to season even the rarest of beef into the most delectable morsel one can ever hope to taste."

The mention of food stirred Icení's stomach to a grumble. "Being quasi does have its drawbacks."

"Yes, while still human, we must also feed the vampire inside. And for our mortal bodies, such partnerships aren't always the most favored."

"No," she commented.

Donovan spun on his heel and headed toward the door. He stopped in the hallway and looked back. "If you need anything ... anything at all. Please do not hesitate to ask."

"Thank you."

He closed the door behind him and left her to her own company.

Icení felt a sudden loss in the core of her heart. She ran to the door, but she stopped short of opening it. The thought of a warm bath filled with fragrant water flooded her mind. Now, if she could only imagine the steaming tub minus Donovan

inside it, she'd be just fine.

Chapter Twelve

Donovan wandered through the castle, his every nerve set on end. Under normal circumstances, he would be glad to be home, back in the safe cocoon of Dun Sidhe, the place where all his secrets were so closely guarded. But tonight his heart and his thoughts didn't seem to want to settle down.

He entered the library and headed straight for the bookshelf. Under the watchful stare of a gold-gilt bat with unfurled wings hanging in the center of the wall of mahogany bookcases, Donovan reached up and pulled out a cleverly hidden leather-covered volume. The tall bookcases parted and the entrance to a dark alley appeared.

He reached for a torch hanging on the wall just past the library's boundaries. The fiber wrapped stalk ignited in an instant, lighting his path as he descended down the dark, dank ramp. As Donovan turned a corner, he heard the bookcases move back into place.

The catacombs, located several stories beneath Dun Sidhe, served to hide his greatest treasures alongside copies of the ancient Vampyric prophecies. But more importantly, the catacombs were where his father's body had been laid to rest. When matters became too overwhelming or there were situations in which he needed guidance, Donovan headed to the catacombs. And tonight he had several issues on his mind.

The final bend of the ramp came into view. With a cautious step, Donovan placed one of his boot heels into a groove at

the end of the ramp and then stepped down onto the first of a seemingly endless row of small, uneven steps. At the bottom of the stone staircase, he entered a massive room. The cold surroundings chilled him to the bone.

He set the lighted torch he carried into a secure holder hanging on the wall. Shadowy flames danced across the room. He headed toward the center of the chamber where a large marble sarcophagus sat marked with his father's name engraved on one side.

He took a moment and prayed a silent prayer to the gods for his father's eternal peace, and then he took a deep breath and placed his hands upon the top of the stone tomb. With a vigorous push, he slid the lid off its box pedestal and into a catty-cornered position. He reached one hand deep into the sarcophagus, his fingers searching for the small hidden compartment located above a second marble coffin inside the first.

A click echoed through the chamber's silent, dead air.

Donovan slipped his fingers inside the small drawer-like box that popped out inside the marble container. The pad of his forefinger glided over smooth metal. *The Ceni relic...*

He twisted the familiar gold charm, attached to a tethered piece of rope, over his fingers and gave a slight tug, pulling the item out of the box.

With his free hand, Donovan dipped into his waistcoat pocket and retrieved the necklace Iceni had lost on the floor of his bedroom. He stepped away from the sarcophagus and crossed the room.

Holding both hands under the flaming torch, he compared the two gold pieces side by side. The designs on the individual relics appeared to be part of a larger picture drawn continuously from one piece into the other. Even the bumpy surface flowed from one charm to the next in an unbroken pattern. Iceni had indeed been telling the truth. Donovan knew now that he needed no one's confirmation of the relic's authenticity. Only three pieces had existed in all of history. If Iceni had one, he had the other and Vastos had the third, it would have been virtually impossible for a replica of any of the other two pieces to have been made. From what he knew of the Ceni, the token came straight from the gods, and as such, only a god could duplicate it. Besides, it would not do anyone any good if they did. Only a true Ceni tribal member or a true Upyran could invoke the powers of the Ceni race, since the dark Vampyric realm had played an important part in gaining the Ceni additional powers from the gods when the tribe had chosen to unite with Vastos.

Donovan sensed a disturbance in the floors above the catacombs. He placed Iceni's relic back into his waistcoat pocket and returned to the marble tomb. Iceni's piece of the relic would be safe in his private chambers until later tonight, he decided. He took one last look at the ancient relic. He had been instructed to use the relic in order to prove the identity of the girl he was supposed to find and then keep safe.

Closing his eyes, Donovan recalled his father's voice, the apparent tension veiling the man's face as he gave out the orders, and last but not least, he remembered his father's touch upon his shoulders. The firm yet gentle grasp of his

father's hands. It was the last time he was to see his father alive. If only he'd known that fact then, he would have said so many things to his father, so many things he would now never have the chance to say.

Donovan opened his eyes and replaced the Celtic relic inside the sealed box. Stepping around the marble container, he placed a strong grip on one corner of the lid and pushed it back into its original position.

He spun on his heel and headed across the room. Grabbing the flaming torch, he made his way out of the catacombs and back to the living quarters above. Tonight, he would return Icen's part of the Ceni relic to her. And for now, for her own good, he would forgo telling her he had the second piece of the whole.

* * * *

Icen lingered in the warm bath water, her body finally free of the cold, damp chill that had tormented her on the ride to Dun Sidhe. She weaved her hands through the water. The delightful fragrance of lavender wafted to her nostrils, relaxing her in ways she hadn't enjoyed in ages. She longed for a tub of her own. The vision of a house, a family, and a garden filled with roses and greens all tormented her. She hadn't had a true home since Vastos and his army had ransacked her father's castle two thousand years ago. Donovan could provide her with all these things. If only she were born of Itycan blood. The thought of losing the vampire protectorate once their joint task was completed, pained her.

She'd never loved, in all her years, but for some strange reason, she knew what she felt for Donovan was indeed love.

She cursed to herself. She had no right to even imagine herself a place in Donovan's world.

She played with the water, running her hands through the warm waves once more. Her mind suddenly became acutely aware of the fact that the basin in which she now sat was Donovan Bramwell's personal tub. Simpson had managed to find her soap fragrant with lavender oil and rose leaves. But the distinct aroma of sandalwood and bergamot filled the room. She wondered what it would be like to bathe with Donovan. The tub was certainly large enough for two people, her body seeming to swim in the vast copper basin.

Iceni reached for the floating bar of lavender soap and rubbed the slippery square over the palm of her hand. A soft lather formed. She washed her body, her fingers gliding over her skin. The thought of Donovan's hands caressing her flesh tantalized her. The man would make for a great bath mate, she thought breathlessly.

A knock rapped at the door.

"Yes?" she said.

"Do you have need of your maid yet, my lady?" the servant said.

"No, thank you. I can manage on my own."

"As y' wish. Just be sure in letting me know when the room is empty. I will have the tub removed when ye be finished."

Iceni heard the outer door connecting her bedroom to the bathing chamber close with a slight thud.

She rose from the tub and reached for a length of cloth that had been laid out for her to dry with. The crisp fresh linen smelled of springtime, and she lingered for several seconds, the towel held under her nose.

A door closed in the other room on the opposite side of the bathing chamber. *Donovan ...* She sensed him instantly, his strong aura now familiar enough for her to easily detect. Careful not to be heard, she glided across the room. Small droplets of water splattered on the floor beside her wet foot imprints. At the door, she waited, listening intently to Donovan's breathing, his heartbeat. She lifted her hand and grabbed hold of the doorknob. Turning the crystal bulb, she opened the wooden portal no more than a smidgen.

She eyed Donovan standing near a chair. The man wore no shirt, only a pair of tight fitting breeches and black riding boots. The fine, muscled line of his wide shoulders leading to a smaller waist set her heart to racing. She wanted nothing more than to reach out and run her fingers over his muscle-rippled flesh, then wrap her arms about his body and allow him to pull her close.

He took a step back, and Icen held her breath. Donovan appeared to be fidgeting with an item he retrieved from the pocket of his waistcoat. He put the garment back down upon the chair and cocked his head to one side.

A flash of gold glistened from his hand. She wondered what he held, but she couldn't see from so faraway. Then he started to turn around, and she closed the door, careful not to make any noise.

She went back to the side of the tub and finished drying off. She couldn't wait to slide her feet into the new slippers. Tonight, she decided, she would dazzle Donovan to the point of no return. Monster or not, she no longer could resist the man.

Chapter Thirteen

After putting the Ceni relic in a safe place in his room, Donovan headed downstairs. As he neared the drawing room, a light, tingly sensation stirred his soul. *Simpson.*

He recognized his valet's aura immediately. He quickly ducked into the library, reassuring himself the secret doors to the catacombs had shut properly. Certain that his secrets were safely tucked away beneath Dun Sidhe, he made a beeline down the main corridor and bolted through the open doorway leading to where he sensed Simpson's presence.

In the center of the room he spotted Conor Ashwood's body sprawled out on the settee. The man's right foot dangled halfway between the yellow and white striped sofa and the floor.

Donovan cursed to himself. By the looks of it, his good friend was drunk again. He turned to Simpson, who stood behind the upholstered piece of furniture. "How long has he been like this?"

"For several hours now. I didn't have the chance to tell you upstairs."

Donovan ran a hand through his hair. "Did he arrive in this state, or are we responsible for feeding his thirst?"

"My lord, I may not be in your good favor at present, but I am no fool. Of course the man arrived in said state."

Donovan bent down and placed his arms beneath Conor's. He gave a tug and pulled the man upright, forcing his friend

to stir from a deep sleep. He tapped Conor's cheeks with the back of his hand. "Ashwood, can you hear me?"

Conor groaned.

Donovan looked up at Simpson. "Bring me a cup of brew to help him out of this." He turned his attentions back to Conor. "Come on, man. I need you alert now, not dead to the world."

The vampire valet disappeared and returned in a flash, holding a silver tray with a single china cup. "I assure you, my lord," Simpson said, "This will do the trick."

Donovan passed the cup under his nose and then scrunched his face. "What the devil is in this?"

"A mixture of herbs and such. Cook swears by it, especially when he's had too much port."

Donovan raised an eyebrow and Simpson frowned.

"Very well, another matter for me to deal with at a later time," Donovan said. He brought the pungent smelling drink to Conor's lips and ignored the man's waving hands flailing about in protest, gently forcing him to drink the brew.

Conor pushed the cup away after several full swallows. "Bloody hell, Bram. Are you trying to kill me?"

Donovan gave up a chuckle. "Hardly." He sat back upon the oval coffee table and eyed his long-time friend. The man's face seemed to have aged drastically over the last few years. A pang of sympathy shot through him. "Tell me about your son."

"Please, not now."

Donovan nodded in Simpson's direction, motioning for the valet to take his leave. He knew Conor guarded the

knowledge of his son's existence with great care, and he hoped that once alone the man would reveal important information needed to find the boy.

The doors to the drawing room closed with a soft click.

"If I am to try to find Samuel, I need to know whatever you can remember about him and the last time you saw him."

Conor rubbed his forehead with his right hand. "It was slightly more than a year ago. But he was just a babe. I have no idea what the child looks like today, save for going by my own looks and that of Siobhan's."

"Unfortunately, I bloody well know what you look like," Donovan said, trying desperately to ease his friend's tensions. "And if the gods have been good to you, the child will look more like Siobhan, than yourself."

Conor offered a slight chuckle. "I know what you're up to, Bram, and it won't work. I am far too gone for saving. The situation has taken everything from me, and I am afraid I've nothing left to give."

"Nonsense. Your son is out there somewhere, and if it is the last thing I do, I am going to find him. I stake my soul on it, Ash. And may the gods forgive me, but if I go through all this and you don't shape up, I will indeed kill you in the end."

Conor rose from the settee, but stumbled.

Donovan caught him before he cracked his head on the table. "All right, you need to get home. I'll have my man Higgins take you back to Dublin."

"No," Conor protested. "I have my carriage waiting outside." He paused. "At least I think that is how I came to be here. Mayhap it was my father's phaeton. Good God, I hope

that wasn't the case. His lordship will kill me if he learns of this."

"Your drunken stupor or your visit to Dun Sidhe?"

"Both."

"Why do you always toy with the vampire in me, Ash?" Donovan asked as he read his friend's thoughts. "In truth, you are worse than a younger brother. You're like the devil incarnate."

Conor leaned on him. "Please," he said in a slight slur, "just this once. I swear upon my mother's grave, I'll never ask you to use mind control on my father's driver again."

Donovan let out a deep breath. He rose from the table and helped Conor to the hall.

Simpson waited near the front door, the large portal already opened wide.

"See to it that his lordship's driver remembers nothing of Conor's visit or the man's current ill state."

"As you wish, my lord." Simpson took Conor from Donovan's grasp and led the mumbling man to his waiting carriage.

From the entryway of Dun Sidhe, Donovan watched Conor put safely into the carriage and then Simpson conversing with the driver. The vampire valet did his job well, admitted Donovan. Ashwood's father would never learn of Conor's visit or of his drunken state.

Donovan turned away from the door and headed back to the library. If memory served him right, Siobhan had been a blond, as was his dear friend, and both had blue eyes. Chances were their son had similar features. He tallied the

details in his head. Blond hair, blue eyes, a boy a little more than a year old...

Donovan held out his hand a short distance from the carpet, moving it higher, then lower, then higher again, trying desperately to assess a year old child's height.

"Is something wrong?"

Iceni's sweet voice halted his thoughts. Donovan jerked his head toward the library entrance and stared in awe. She wore a pale pink gown, a bit heavier in fabric than her earlier choice of dress, but still revealing enough to entice him. Soft pink ribbons dangled from her dark curls that framed her face in a favorable manner. A zing of awareness bolted from his head to his toes, and then back up again, stopping for a bit longer than he cared for at his groin. He cursed to himself. The woman had no idea just how enticing she could be ... or perhaps she knew too much so. He really should have had Simpson find that burlap sack he'd thought about earlier. "I was merely trying to imagine Conor's son and how tall the boy must be."

"The child you're looking for?"

Donovan nodded. He turned on his heel and headed for the liquor table. He poured himself some port from a crystal decanter and a glass of Madeira, a drink more appropriate for a lady, for Iceni. He walked back across the room, his boots slightly skimming the carpet. "A drink before dinner?"

Iceni took the glass and raised it to her lips. She scrunched her nose as she took a sip.

"Simpson tends to the wines, mixing the necessary ingredients to satisfy both mortal and vampire alike." He

didn't feel the need to go into great detail. The thought of explaining about blood mixed in with the liquors wasn't an appealing mention before dinner, and he imagined Icení would feel the same. The mortal side of a quasi was almost as powerful as the Vampyric side.

"So, tell me Donovan, who are we looking for?"

"A child a little over a year old, with blond hair and blue eyes." He paused. "At least, that is what I hope he looks like."

"Hope? You mean you don't even know?" A look of confusion settled over Icení's face.

"Conor, the boy's father, hasn't seen the child since the babe was born. I can only go by his looks and that of his late wife's."

"I am sorry. I did not know your friend had lost his wife. To lose his son like this as well must be painfully devastating."

"It is. Conor is in a complete muddle. I've never known him to be in such a state in all the years we have been friends. I have to find the boy or I fear the situation will kill him."

Icení scanned the room, as if looking for something. She sauntered over to a small table in the far corner and reached a hand inside her reticule fashioned at her waist. Retrieving a small handkerchief from inside the purse at her side, she placed the square cut of fabric on the table and then set her glass on it. "Vastos keeps a manor house outside Dublin," she said. "There are Upyran guards everywhere, but if you enter the property from the neighboring estate, you can do so by slipping onto the dark lord's land from an unguarded parcel of

forest. The children are housed in a rather large home to the east of the main house, not far from the unguarded area."

"Have you seen the estate firsthand?"

Iceni nodded. "I have been there several times hoping to find one of the Ceni children with whom I escaped the Roman's. I had heard rumors he still lived. I imagined Vastos had turned him, made him vampire and now keeps him in his employ. But the rumors proved to be false. I sensed no Ceni in the vicinity. And after a dozen or so attempts, I realized I had been given wrong information."

Donovan noted the deep sadness in Iceni's eyes. He wanted to reach out and grab her, pull her to him and tell her everything would eventually turn out all right. But he couldn't, for he didn't truly know what would happen in his world from one moment to the next. And he would never dream of giving Iceni false hopes. She had been through enough in her lifetime.

Simpson appeared in the doorway. "Dinner is served, my lord, your highness."

Donovan extended his hand to Iceni. She accepted his chaperone and together they headed to the dining room.

Donovan prayed to the gods he would survive the woman's soft touch upon his arm. The vampire inside stirred, heating his blood more so than it did at Bramwell Abbey. Donovan gritted his teeth and ran his tongue over the edges of his suddenly extending fangs. The salty essence of his own blood coated his mouth. Dinner, tonight, would be anything but a pleasurable feast.

* * * *

Vastos stood in the library of his mansion and fumed. He stared across the room, his fiery glare aimed at Edward Brooks. For a mortal living among a tribe of Dead Walkers, Brooks wasn't exactly a bright chap. "Tell me again what Angus Bramwell has done. And this time, do not leave out any details, for if you do, I will have your head."

Edward let out a deep breath and loosened the neck cloth under his chin. "I told you everything; there is nothing more to tell. Old Bramwell has given up the throne, allowing Donovan to take his place. He did so by his own hand."

"A Lord Protector cannot turn his own soul. Do you realize the implications of what you are saying?"

Edward swallowed hard and nodded.

"You are accusing my brother of taking his own life, in a sense. A quasi turning his own soul is equal to the mortal sin of suicide."

"I am telling you what I know."

Vastos eyed the man with a cautious stare. "The Upyran courts will show you no mercy if you have lied to me."

The man's mouth gaped open. "Why would I risk all that you have done for me with a simple lie? I have no reason to come to you and tell you such nonsense unless it is true."

Vastos rubbed the palms of his hands together. "If what you say is true, my nephew will have to forfeit the throne. That will leave only myself as the next heir." The notion pleased him. He could finally take the title that had belonged to him all along. "For ages I have awaited this moment. My

younger brother had no right to the Vampyric throne. And now, after all this time, it will finally be mine."

Edward rose from the settee. "Mayhap you will have that chance sooner than you think."

Vastos cocked his head to one side and stared at the man. "What makes you think so?"

"Donovan is on his way here. I saw him from the shadows as I took my night ride. He travels with a woman."

His soul twisted with a sick sense of pleasure. "Find them both and bring them to me."

"Dead or alive?"

"Oh, I intend to savor Donovan's death for myself. Stun him. He is still part mortal, and as such, I would imagine you could take him. As for the woman, I care not what happens to her. But I do want the amulet she wears. It looks similar to this one." Vastos held out his hand, palm side up. A small gold relic appeared on the instant.

Edward stared at the trinket. "Fine. I will bring Donovan to you, along with the amulet. I am free to go?"

"Yes," Vastos said.

"And my pay?"

Vastos squinted. "Tell me, Edward, how, exactly, did you learn of my brother's deeds?"

"From a fellow peer."

"Which one?"

"Why? You promised that our dealings would concern no other mortal."

He laughed. With a flick of his finger, Vastos drew Edward towards him. He reached out and grabbed a firm grip of the man's neck cloth and pulled the knot tight about his flesh.

Edward gasped and choked.

"Give me a name."

"Conor ... Sir Conor Ashwood. The man told me Old Angus had died. Upon learning this news, I went searching, did a bit of my own research and managed, through my other connections, to learn that the man had turned his own soul."

Vastos let go. "Is this Ashwood someone who can be counted on? Mayhap I should employ the man."

"No," Edward shouted.

"Why? Is he not trustworthy?"

"Well, yes, of course he is trustworthy. I have no reason to believe his information as anything but correct. I would not have come here if I believed him to be lying. But you cannot employ Ashwood because he is Donovan's closest friend."

Vastos drummed his fingers on the desk at his side. "Why would Donovan's best friend tell you such vital information about him?"

"He was drunk at the time, as he often is these days. He did not realize with whom he was talking or what he was saying."

"Clever," Vastos said. He leaned over the desk and opened a drawer. From inside, he withdrew a small velvet sack and tossed it to Edward. "Now get out of my sight before I have the desire to feed upon your neck."

A look of fear crossed Edward's face. "You swore you would never turn me."

"I changed my mind. Now go, while you still have the chance."

Chapter Fourteen

Dinner didn't go exactly as Donovan had planned. Sitting across from the irresistible Icení, he had watched in agony as the woman innocently toyed with him, from her bashful smiles to her playful licking of her fingers as she slowly picked apart Cook's latest dessert. Under normal circumstances, Donovan hated jam tartlets, but the way Icení held the sugary treats in her long, tapered fingers and slowly nibbled away at the sweet temptations nearly had him cork-brained. He was certain that had she asked him his name, he wouldn't have been capable of answering. And now, here he was, standing at the door to her rooms, one arm above her head and the other securely about her waist.

"Please give my thanks to your cook, my lord," Icení said. "I cannot truly remember the last time I have partaken of such a fine meal. Especially dessert. The tartlets were simply irresistible."

"Yes, they were," he said, the fingers of his right hand tenderly brushing against Icení's cheek. Between the port and the heat coming from his base desires, he felt as if he would self-combust at any moment. "But they were not as irresistible as you, my lady." He leaned forward, his eyes focused on her plump, full lips.

She reached behind her, her hand twisting the door's latch.

The sudden click brought him back to reality.

"It is late, my lord. Dawn comes soon, I can feel the sting of morning upon my soul."

"Iceni..."

"Good sleep, my lord."

She opened the door and slipped behind the carved wood plank.

* * * *

Iceni held her breath. The scent of sandalwood and other exotic spices still lingered on her gown from Donovan's own clothing. Not only did she find the man handsome in face, but his scent stirred her body in ways she had never experienced before. She removed the lace fichu tucked into the neckline of her gown and lifted the thin fabric to her face. Donovan's cologne wafted to her nostrils. Iceni closed her eyes and envisioned the man's lips upon her own. She nearly went weak in the knees when he'd attempted the very same action only moments ago. She sighed, and then opened her eyes.

Leaning against the back of the door, she wondered where Donovan had gone to after she left him in the hall. She placed her head closer to the wood panel and listened for his heartbeat, his breathing. The rhythmic beating of a steady pulse filled her ears. She sensed him nearby, his virile body within inches of her own.

"Closer than you think," he said.

Donovan's deep voice startled her. She spun around on the instant. The man had invaded her rooms, and he hadn't even used the door.

Donovan stepped closer. "A vampire," he said, "albeit a quasi, needs no open door to enter a room."

"But he does need an invitation," she retorted.

He flashed a wide grin. "Pure hogwash, my lady. A rule of myth, nothing more."

Donovan reached for her hand and pulled her in close to his chest. The heat of his muscled body warmed her entire being. Then he lifted her face with his fingers and dipped his head. The searing touch of his full lips melted hers on the instant.

Donovan's tongue swirled with her own in a dance of harmony that sent a zing right down to the secret place between her thighs. Icení sighed. She gave into Donovan completely, wrapping her arms around his neck and twisting her fingers into the curl of hair at his nape. His mouth tasted of jam tartlets and wine.

He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed. The silk coverlet caressed her skin, but it didn't feel nearly as good or as fulfilling as Donovan's lips upon her own flesh.

He discarded his jacket and waistcoat and fumbled with the stiff white neck cloth knotted under his chin. The man appeared all muddled and agog, but despite his apparent frustration with his suit of clothing, he stripped his body bare in mere seconds.

The bed dipped at her side as he lay down next to her. She liked having him this close to her, and she stretched out her arms and once more entangled her hands around his neck.

He leaned forward, taking her mouth with his lips. His deep kiss sent a wondrous tingle throughout her body,

sending her soul spiraling to a place she imagined only existed in the realm of Utopia. As he reached for the hem of her gown, she took a deep breath. His large, rough hands skimmed her stockings, working their way upwards settling at the patch of bare skin just above her garters.

With the pad of his fingers he drew small circles from the outer edge of her thighs to the heated area between her legs. A gentle shove of his hand parted her legs giving him easy access to her most private parts.

He caressed her curls and then grazed the small nub tucked away behind her nether lips. On the instant, she lost the small amount of composure she had left. Donovan had managed, in a matter of mere seconds, to totally and utterly undo her senses. And she couldn't have been more pleased.

His fingers toyed with the ribbon garters tied around her thighs. Slowly, he tugged at the knotted silk and pulled the garters free, first the right one, then the left. The smooth ribbons fell to the bed, cascading over her legs. The slippery, silken feel sent shivers down her spine. She took in a deep breath and moaned.

Donovan reached for the top of her stocking. He caressed her bare flesh, then slid his hand down her leg, rolling the stocking to her ankle, and then finally off her foot.

He repeated the wickedly hot moves on her other leg. As he removed the second stocking, he grazed his hand in an upward direction, retracing his earlier steps. He slid his palm over her thighs and sought the heated area in between.

Iceni smelled her own scent dance on the air as Donovan's fingers caressed her now aching bud. The tantalizing

sensation sent her over the edge, causing her to desire his touch like she'd never imagined.

He kissed her on the neck as his fingers continued to caress her nether region, flicking back and forth over her sensitive bud. And then he worked his hand up and down, over and around, toying with one of the most private parts of her body.

His hand glided downward, and Icení gasped when he slid one finger inside her, and then quickly pulled it out. He repeated the shocking move several times, alternating between her sensitive mound and the depths of her womanhood.

Tiny ripples exploded inside her, sending a wave of pleasure through her body. Icení cried out, a small gasp falling from her lips.

Donovan pulled his hand away from that tender area between her legs and tugged her gown over her head. Icení sighed at the sense of loss she felt when he removed his fingers from her body.

He looked down at her, his eyes wandering to her now bare breasts. "You are the most magnificent creature I have ever seen. More perfect than Venus herself."

She offered a faint laugh and turned away, and the sear of his lips against her neck, sending a jolt through her soul. He ran his tongue ever so slightly along the line of her jugular, sending a whirlwind of emotions rattling through her Vampyric nerves. Then he flicked the edge of his tongue back and forth, over and around, and the pointed tips of his fangs skimmed her skin.

She sucked in a deep breath and quickly turned her neck, giving him free access to the sensitive area near her jugular.

Donovan pulled away and dipped his head further down her body, leaving a trail of heated kisses from her neck to the hollow between her breasts. He gently ran his lips over a nipple, the glorious sensation awaking the tender bud, pulling the peak of her breast into a firm mound.

He lowered his head and took the taut bud between his teeth, claiming it with a raw possessiveness. He closed his lips and suckled her, pulling her nipple deep into his mouth all the while teasing it with the tip of his tongue.

Iceni sighed and moaned. Pleasure shot through her like a bolt of fiery lightning, igniting her senses to a new scorching level.

Donovan settled his body between her legs. The hard tip of his jutting manhood rubbed against the aching mound at the apex of her thighs.

She parted her lips, a deep, unexpected moan emitting from somewhere at the back of her throat. "Donovan ... I have ... never..."

At Iceni's words, the full impact of his actions hit Donovan where it counted most. He threw back his head and uttered a guttural oath. What the bloody hell was he thinking? He reached for the edge of the coverlet sitting in a wrinkled heap at the bottom of the bed, and pulled it up over his back. He pulled away from Iceni and wrapped the silk cover around her body. "Forgive me, Iceni. I had no right..."

She cut him off by raising a finger to his lips and inched closer to him, her bare breasts jutting firmly against his

chest. He reacted on the instant. The ache only added to his already far too intense desire for the princess, but he simply wrapped his arms about her and held her close. Somehow the notion of letting her go did not please him.

As the sun rose, she nuzzled against him and murmured a series of inaudible words. Then, in a matter of seconds, she fell asleep in his arms, unaware, he was sure, of the misery she caused him.

She squirmed slightly in her place, throwing one leg over his thigh, almost as if to confirm his dratted suspicions. Donovan cursed to himself. The warm, wet essence of his sleeping princess teased his hard, aching rod. He did not need the woman sleeping in so inviting a position.

With a huff, Donovan let out a deep breath and swore another silent oath. He doubted even the deep Vampyric sleep would relieve him of his present torment. And to think at dusk he and Icení would set out alone on their agreed upon journey. He prayed to the gods that Vastos would claim him before he experienced another night like this one. For if the dark lord didn't, he knew next time there would be no stopping him from taking Icení and branding her his own.

* * * *

Vastos stirred from a restless sleep, his mind still reeling from Brooks's visit. He wondered if the man could truly be trusted or if, mayhap, he had paid him too much. Regardless, the damage was done. He should never have allowed Edward Brooks to know about the Vampyric world. That slip of his tongue would now cost him dearly. He wondered how many

times the man would return, bearing more ludicrous news and asking for more gold pieces.

He rose from his bed and stopped at the chair where his mage slept, sprawled in an upright position that Vastos deemed as most uncomfortable. The man irked him to no end. He ran his hand over the sleeping man's face, securing the sun's deep sedation that claimed the mage's Vampyric soul. He would not wake until Vastos had returned.

He ventured through the house, a sudden stirring of his base desires sending him into a frenzy. He needed his brides. Only they could ease his mind and his body. Vastos thought the sudden craving an odd notion. He had given them each a good tumble earlier and yet he still craved their touch. Visions of Donovan filled his mind. The man must have had his own whore tonight. And if his senses were feeding him correct information, Donovan had formed a very close alliance with the Ceni princess. A closer alliance than he had hoped.

Vastos cursed to himself. He wanted to live through his nephew, not be controlled by the man's every action. The bite had gone wrong, he thought. Terribly wrong. But until he had Donovan within his grasp, he had to sate his desires based upon his nephew's own cravings. He descended to the subterranean levels of his manor house. A dark crypt lined with several stone coffins rested in the central chamber. He approached each sleeping case, one by one, running his hands over the outer lids, feeling the beating hearts of the women inside. Two of the three had succumbed to the deep sleep of the pending daylight. The other still lingered in the twilight between life and death. Vastos reached for his

semiconscious bride. He lifted the lid off her coffin and slipped inside, joining her for what he hoped would be a wild romp before the sun fully rose in the sky. Linking himself to Donovan had caused him an increasing amount of distress over recent days and he was prepared to take back his own life, on his own terms, more now than ever before.

Chapter Fifteen

Donovan waited at the bottom of the stairs for Iceni to finish dressing. He bowed his head and made small circles at his temples with his fingers.

"Are you ill, my lord?" Simpson's voice cut through his ears. "I woke with a damnable headache. Nothing I cannot manage."

"I see," the valet said.

The cold edge of something smooth and round froze the front of his hand. Donovan lifted his head and saw Simpson standing in front of him, holding out a crystal glass,

"It will help remedy the pain in your head." The man paused, his thin lips curving to one side. "Well, at least the ache in the head above your neck."

Donovan shot him a glare but refrained from commenting. He had no desire to spar with the vampire valet at present. He took the glass and downed the horrible tasting contents. "Bloody hell, man. You are a wicked soul, if ever I knew one."

"True, but I get the job done. And," he commented with a smile, "I am the best vampire valet you will ever find."

Donovan nodded, having no choice but to agree with the man. After handing Simpson the now empty glass, he rose from the bottom step and slapped his gloves against the palm of his hand, a bit of annoyance racing through his nerves. He'd never had to wait for anyone in the past. What in the gods' names could be taking the woman so long to dress? For the life of him, he would never figure out the opposite sex.

With all their primping and fussing, they missed their counterparts' entire point of view. A man never paid much attention to such frivolities.

The scent of lavender mixed with roses wafted in the air, and Donovan jerked his head toward the top of the stairs. The sight that greeted his eyes suddenly contradicted everything he had just thought.

Iceni stood at the top landing, dressed in a pair of riding pants, black boots, a plain brown waistcoat, and a crisp white shirt. From her head to her toes, she was completely organized and tidy. Even her long hair fell in neat, soft waves around her face and shoulders. Not a single thing was amiss on the woman. He wondered, even secretly hoped, that Iceni had dressed for him tonight. That mayhap she cared what he thought of her. And if so, he couldn't have been more pleased.

He swallowed hard. Even from beneath a suit of man's clothing, Iceni's ample breasts showed through, as did her curvy hips. Visions of last night's romp came back to haunt him, sending a strong bolt of heat straight to his groin. He cursed to himself. The woman had an uncanny knack for making him swear an awful lot. Not even spending time around the Stags had forced him into such rudeness. He looked away.

"Is something wrong, Donovan?" Iceni asked. "I certainly hope you are not put out by the outfit, for I thought this was better suited for our journey than a ladies gown."

He shrugged. "It is fine. Bloody well fine."

"Good," she said, walking down the stairs. "Simpson thought so, too. In fact, he helped find me the items from your old wardrobe."

Simpson. He should have known. Donovan added yet another mental note to an already way too long list that he needed to discuss with the valet when this whole mess was said and done.

A stable hand entered the hallway. "My lord," the hefty man said. "Your horses have been brought 'round."

"Thank you."

The man turned on his heel and headed back from where he'd come.

Donovan reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a small pouch. He looked to Icení, standing at his side. "I believe this belongs to you, your highness." He handed her the small drawstring bag, placing it into the center of her palm.

Icení opened the pouch and turned it upside down, emptying its contents into her hand. A gold charm and chain felt out. "You found my relic." Tears filled her eyes.

"I believe it came undone in my bedroom at Henrietta Street. It must have happened when you ... when you..." He couldn't bring himself to speak of her bare body.

"You have no idea how much this means to me, Donovan. Thank you for finding it."

She jumped up and wrapped her hands around his neck. The feel of her body against his added more fuel to his already fiery desires for her. Donovan pushed her away. "Let me help you fasten the chain."

Having her breasts pointing away from him would help alleviate part of his problem. Or so he thought.

Iceni eagerly turned about and gathered her hair in her hands, pulling the long, shiny locks to one side and away from the back of her neck. She then handed him the gold relic.

Donovan took the chain and draped it around her swanlike neck, fumbling with the clasp. The sight of her alabaster skin enticed him. Making his way around the clasp solely by touch, he averted his eyes downward, which was a bad mistake. The sight of the woman's curvy hips and well-rounded bum set him on end.

"Bloody hell," he mumbled.

"What?"

"I said, you are swell, the relic is set." He quickly latched the chain's clasp before she pulled away.

Simpson returned. "I will give you ample time for this trip, my lord, not a second more. If I sense a problem with your return, I will send word to Luther and to the Protectorate."

Donovan didn't like the idea, but he knew such plans would at least help secure Iceni's safety or at least her retrieval should they get caught. "Fine. And what about weapons? Did you raid the vaults for the stake pistol?"

Simpson nodded and produced two pistols, a small pouch, a vial of holy water and a strand of rosary beads.

Donovan took one pistol and placed it inside his waistcoat. He reached for the pouch and pulled open the drawstring. Looking into the small bag, he counted the items. "There are

enough stakes to kill a whole army of vampires, Simpson. What were you thinking?"

"That, mayhap, you would be facing a bloody army."

Donovan tugged the drawstring closed. He handed a pistol to Icení. "This is a special weapon made for the Protectorate. The pistol shoots small wooden stakes dipped in pure silver. Despite their miniature size, their punch is mighty. One stake, received to the heart, can kill a full-fledged vampire on the instant. If you miss your target, it will at least give him a good stun."

Icení took the pistol and let out a deep breath.

Donovan sensed her apprehension at carrying such a weapon. "We have no choice, your highness. A situation might arise where it will come down to you or your enemy."

She nodded as if she understood and then placed the pistol, along with numerous stakes, into a pocket on the inside of her waistcoat.

Donovan reached for the rosary beads. "I would appreciate it if you would refrain from taking these from my pockets, Simpson. You know how I hate to be without them."

"They were left in your waistcoat from two days ago. I knew you would not be pleased if you discovered them missing, so I simply made a point to give them to you now so you could place them in the pocket of the suit you wear tonight."

He huffed. He really hated it when Simpson was more on top of things than was he. He stared at the beads. He could still feel his mother's aura emanating from the small round jewels. Donovan looked back to Simpson. "Keep these here."

"But my lord, you never go without them."

"Yes, but I have no desire to lose them to Vastos. They are better off kept here, in the safety of my home." It would be the first time he had ever dared venture into a dangerous situation without the beads somewhere on his person. But to take a chance and lose his mother's rosary to Vastos was something he couldn't live with. Despite being very much a vampire, he was still a quasi, and that meant he still had ties to the mortal world, to his mother's people. Losing the beads would mean losing the last tangible tie to her. And that, Donovan thought, was something he'd never want to happen.

Donovan strolled to the end of the hall. At the door, he stopped and glanced back. "Are you ready your highness?"

Iceni nodded and made her way to the door. Two horses waited outside, both tethered to a post, standing side by side. Donovan descended the stairs, Iceni a close distance behind him. A stable hand undid the first horse, then the second.

Donovan helped Iceni to mount the smaller of the two creatures, and then mounted his own stallion. "Are you positive you can identify Vastos's estate?"

"Yes," she said. "He uses a cloaking device, shielding his Vampyric aura and his estate, but I managed to break through the barrier several years ago."

"Good, then I believe we are set for the journey." He nudged his horse to go first, and the animal slowly trotted off.

Iceni rode behind him.

"Pull up around here," he said. "I want you at my side."

"Do you not trust me?"

He laughed to himself. As if the woman could really be a threat to him. If she were bare naked, perhaps. "I want you where I can see you so, should an enemy attack, I can swing you onto my horse."

"Ride with you? Bloody hell no!"

He raised an eyebrow at her vulgarity. "We really need to do something about that language of yours. Where the devil did you learn such things?"

"From rogues such as yourself, where else?"

He offered her a wicked grin and shook his head. "If you plan on taking your rightful place as a Ceni princess you will need to make a few adjustments to your mannerism."

She didn't answer him. Donovan turned to look in Icen's direction. The woman's pensive mood caught him off guard. He wished women were more easily understood. "Did I say something to displease you?"

"By all means, no."

"Then why the sudden silence?"

"I was just wondering if you were also referring to my mannerism in bed last night. Or if you implied I needed to change my ways only at other times."

He opened his mouth to answer, but he thought better of it. The woman played him like no one else had ever managed to do. She and Simpson would make a wicked pair, he imagined. The two of them combined as one team would kill him in a single season. Of that, he had no doubt.

* * * *

They rode for several hours, stopping only for the horses to rest. Along the way, Icení told him various details about her life prior to the Roman invasion of the Isles, and he shared with her a few stories of his own childhood. The night brought a calming sense to his soul.

"Vastos's estate should be in the vicinity," Icení said. "A stone marker on the far edge of the Marquis of Barr's land is the entrance to the property."

"Barr? Why didn't you tell me that before?" Uneasiness tugged at Donovan's soul. He didn't like the idea of having to cross Brooks's property, even if he was considered an acquaintance of the Marquis at the Temple Barr club.

"What difference would it have made?"

"Edward Brooks, Marquis of Barr, heads up the Stags. They are a notorious group of young, privileged gentleman who have committed unspeakable crimes, but they have never been charged with a single sin."

"And why not?"

"Because, according to the powers that be, the group does not exist. It was outlawed last century. Therefore, the crimes its members have committed cannot be charged against them."

"That doesn't seem very fair," Icení said, wrinkling her nose at the unsettling truth.

"No. It is not."

A rustle in the trees sent his senses spinning to high alert, and his preternatural abilities kicked in on the instant.

Leaning to his side, Donovan reached over for the reins of Icen's horse. He pulled the animal in as close to him as was possible. "Say not a word," he whispered.

He sensed Icen's fear. Apparently, she heard the noise in the trees as well.

Another batch of leaves rattling in the wind echoed in the otherwise silent night air. Donovan scanned the area using his gift of detecting movements in the shape of red shadows—heat emanating from the bodies of living beings. Only one mortal soul stirred in the area.

On one side of the small dirt path, a single man hid in the woods. Mayhap taking the main road to Vastos's estate would have made for a better scheme.

A shot fired into the air, and Icen's horse jumped, kicking her out of her saddle.

Donovan dove to the ground, his only concern being Icen's safety. But before he could say a word to his princess, lying silently upon the grass, the pointed edge of a weapon pricked his back directly behind his heart. And there was no mistaking the identity of the weapon. Donovan Bramwell could tell when the point of a stake was aimed at his body, on any day, at any time. Even in the dead of night.

Chapter Sixteen

Donovan didn't move. The point of the stake jabbed further into his clothing, and he heard the sound of ripping threads, every breaking fiber sounding like thunder rattling in his head.

"Well, well, well," Brooks said, "what do we have here? A bastard, a papist, or mayhap even worse, a vampire." The man accentuated the last word, extending every syllable as if it were a cursed word.

A heated anger shot through Donovan. If he had come to fight Brooks alone, he would have had the bastard pinned to a tree already. But this time around, he had more important things to consider, namely Icení, who lay helplessly upon the ground beneath him. "What do you want, Brooks?"

The man pushed forward, and the stake now made its way past his waistcoat and shirt. The sharp, pointed edge collided with his bare skin.

"'Tis *Lord Barr*, not Brooks. Have you no respect for your oppressors? And to think we're both Dead Walkers and both Stags. I'm disappointed in your crudeness, Bramwell."

"You're a bastard, Barr," Donovan said through gritted teeth. "For every one of you there are ten who disagree with your ways, but they are too damned frightened to voice their opinion in fear of retaliation from the likes of your kind."

An evil laugh broke the night's silence. "Then I have done my job well."

Iceni didn't make a move. Donovan silently searched for her pulse, but came up with nothing. His preternatural hearing made him aware of every last twig snapping in the forest and every dead leaf being crunched by a wild creature. But try as he might, he could hear no heartbeat coming from Iceni's body. He needed to do something and he needed to do it fast. "What do you want from me?"

His skin ripped.

"What do you think, fool? Your heart, then your head."

"Well, I fear I cannot allow that, *Lord Barr*." He hung on to the last two words, emphasizing the syllables in the same manner as Brooks had done earlier.

"You foolish man," Brooks replied. "What choice do you have?"

The point of the stake pushed past his skin and entered the back of his chest, making contact with his heart. A searing pain riddled Donovan's body. On the instant, he flipped over, ripping the stake out of his back, and flew upward, his hands flailing at his sides. He fisted his fingers into a tight ball and spun around in the air. He kicked Brooks in the arm with his boot toe, and his fist collided with the man's chin.

Brooks fell to the ground, his body landing face down. Donovan lunged for him, but it was too late. Brooks had already gotten to his feet. The man swung a fist at him. Donovan ducked.

Brooks tried again, sending a right hook straight to his jaw. Donovan saw stars and his mouth ached.

Brooks sent another round of jabs soaring through the air, striking Donovan's temple. He swayed, his vision blurring. Donovan stepped backward, unsteady on his feet. He knew the gods would be angry if he fought Brooks with anything but his mortal powers. The man couldn't fight against a vampire, and Donovan knew better than to misuse his preternatural abilities. He'd have to settle for fighting Brooks mortal to mortal. Searching his soul, he gathered his strength. He couldn't, *wouldn't*, let Brooks take him. Icení needed him, and he planned on doing everything in his power to protect her. He shook his head, hoping to clear his vision.

Brooks stood in front of him, his hands raised in the air, fingers balled into tight fists. "Ready for another round, Bram? Once I get you to the ground, I will finish you off, then stake you and take your head. You will look quite lovely impaled on a long spike in front of the club. I think the fellows will get a kick out of it. Don't you?"

He had had enough. Edward Brooks needed to be taught a lesson, and now was as good a time as ever.

With a quick swing of his right arm, Donovan's fist collided with Edward's temple, knocking the man to the ground. His face hit a rock, splitting his bottom lip.

Donovan jumped on his back, grabbed a fist of the man's hair in his hand and pulled his head upwards. He leaned in close, his breath fanning Brooks's ear. "I do not appreciate being called bastard or papist, for I am neither."

"But you are vampire," Brooks said through a clenched jaw. "And that makes you as much a cursed spawn as are the

others." He spit onto the ground, blood rushing from his mouth.

Donovan had had more than he could tolerate for one night. He could stomach just about any type of name-calling or ridicule. But no insolent mortal would ever have the right to desecrate the name of the vampire, even if he himself didn't exactly welcome the creature with open arms.

He had Brooks in a tight lock, the man's neck held at an angle that would allow him to break it, when a light touch fell upon his shoulder. "Do not lower yourself to his level, Donovan. You know better."

He turned his head and found Icení standing at his side. She was right. After all, he hadn't made a kill in centuries, and that one was only in true self-defense. He'd survived without using his vampyric abilities in fighting Brooks and now wasn't the time to do something stupid. He released his hold of Brooks's head but refused to pull away from the man completely. There were questions that needed to be answered. "Who told you about the vampire?"

The man's only answer was a sadistic laugh.

Donovan grabbed hold of Brooks's head a second time. "You test my patience, and that, my friend, is not a good thing." The points of his fangs came through, jutting past his lower lip. The taste of the man's blood already tempted his tongue.

A white, ghostlike veil descended over Brooks's face. "All right, all right. It was a vampire named Vastos. He told me everything when he initiated me into his Dead Walker tribe. He said I was to stun you and bring you to him if I ever had

the chance. But it was Conor who told me you were indeed a vampire."

"Conor? I don't believe that."

"He was cupshot, had one too many brandies, and blurted something about you being a creature of the night."

Donovan hissed. "So, why attack me and not my grandfather, too? After all, weren't you the one who started the rumors among the Stags about old Bramwell being the devil incarnate?"

Brooks didn't answer.

Donovan wrapped his fingers tighter about the man's hair.

"Bloody hell, man," Brooks cried.

"Tell me what I want to know."

"He said it had ... to do ... with your blood. Vastos wants you ... not old Bramwell."

Donovan undid his fingers from Brooks's hair and pulled back his hand. The bite had some how intertwined him with Vastos in a way he knew little about. He understood the relationship between a newly made vampire and his maker, but this was different. Vastos had never completed the bite, and Donovan was a quasi to begin with, his soul already belonging to the ancient powers that be, not to some evil entity living in man's realm. He wondered what trick the dark lord was about to play.

Brooks offered up a slight moan.

Donovan dipped his head once again. "Are all the Stags in on this sordid scheme? Are they all mortal Dead Walkers?"

"No," Brooks said. "They believe me insane for thinking you a vampire. They don't know the truth about Vastos or his legions."

"But they are aware of such existences?"

"Yes."

"How? Did Conor tell them all or just you?"

Brooks squirmed beneath Donovan, but he couldn't break free. "Our fathers, they witnessed ... a duel outside of London ages ago. Old Bramwell was pitted against Lord Wendley, a member of Parliament. Wendley won the duel. Your grandfather's pistol had been jammed on purpose, to secure the man's loss. When Lord Bramwell realized this, he turned into a cursed creature and attacked Wendley, killing the man by feasting upon his blood. After that, the Stags knew better than to toy with any Bramwell, cursed or not."

"All Stags but you."

"I learned long ago never to fear any rival."

Donovan chuckled. "I fear then, that you have made a grave mistake, my lord. A grave mistake indeed."

"So kill me and be done with it."

"Oh, I think not. The thought of lowering my standards to your level is rather repulsive to me at the moment." He paused. Brooks squirmed beneath him again, the man's hands grasping at dirt and rock, trying desperately to get a good fitting upon anything of substance. But he didn't stand a chance.

Donovan lifted Brooks's head as far back as was possible without snapping his spine. He tilted the man's neck to one side.

"Good God, no," Brooks cried. "Please, I'll do anything. Anything at all, only do not bite me."

"I already told you," Donovan said. "I have no intention of killing you. And once I give my word, I never recant."

Brooks's breathing came in short pants.

"Look me in the eye."

Brooks shifted his eyes to meet Donovan's as best as was possible from his tilted angle.

"You will remember nothing of our encounter tonight. You will recall only that you stumbled over a rock while wandering your estate, your mind in a muddle, cupshot from the intake of too much brandy. Your sleep will be riddled with visions of blurred nightmares. You will sleep undisturbed until dawn."

A mesmerized gaze glossed over Brooks's eyes. His eyelids fell slowly, and his labored breathing calmed. In mere seconds, the man went limp in Donovan's arms, his body drifting off into a sound sleep.

Donovan waited a moment before rising to his feet. He hated using his powers to oppress an enemy's mind. But with the Protectorate and all of mankind weighing in on one hand, and an irritating lord who was an embarrassment to his own people weighing in on the other, hypnotism was the only alternative to killing the man. And killing a soul wasn't exactly at the top of his list of favorite actions, nor that of the gods.

Iceni ran her hand over his back. "You're bleeding, my lord."

He pulled away from her touch and straightened his jacket. "The wound will heal."

He cracked a whistle, shattering the night air. His horses came galloping out of the forest. He scratched them each lightly between the eyes and offered them a handful of sugar cubes. He stared at Icení who stood only a few feet from him. "I felt no pulse. Heard no heartbeat. I thought you were dead."

She smiled. "If a dog can roll over and play dead, why not a bat? Or should I say a quasi, instead?"

"Do not ever do that again," he said. "You had me by the deepest depths of my soul."

"Do I detect an air of protectiveness in your voice? A sense of concern, my lord?"

He glared at her. "No," he lied, praying his true feelings would hide themselves in the manner of his voice's cold tone. "Our plan simply does not make room for me to carry about a dead body." He walked over to Icení's horse and offered her help to mount.

Icení pushed Donovan aside, making her own way up onto the mare. "I will take back the Cení relic, regardless of the price."

She was a fool to have given into the man the night before. What the devil had come over her, she'd never know. He was insolent, stubborn and definitely a rogue if she'd ever known one. She shot him an angry glare that she hoped would convey her present snit clearly.

Donovan parted his lips as if to comment, but Icení didn't give a fig what the man had to say. "I think it wise we find shelter for the remainder of the night," she said, cutting him

off before he had the chance to speak. "The sun will rise soon and my skin tingles as it is. Tomorrow will be a warm day."

Donovan mounted his stallion. "There is an abandoned cottage just up the road. It used to be an old Protectorate post, but it is no longer used."

"Does it have proper protection for a vampire?"

"If you are asking if it has a crypt, yes," he said, his voice a cold monotone. "We can sleep in the makeshift vault underneath the house."

"Fine." She dug her boot heel into the rump of her horse and left her roguish, quasi-vampire several feet behind.

Donovan's horse neighed. He leaned forward and patted the beast on its side. "Now, now. I know she has your woman with her. But trust me, we won't let them get that far ahead of us." He settled back into his saddle and urged the horse forward.

Iceni waited a few feet ahead, her deep sapphire orbs glittering in the moonlight. Try as he might, Donovan knew he could never stay angry with her. One look at those blue eyes and his heart controlled his head. "Decided to be a bit more civil?"

"No," she said, shaking her head and scowling at him. "It just dawned on me that I do not know the way to this cottage of yours."

He felt his lips turn upwards in a sly grin. "Allow me, your highness." He reached over and grabbed hold of the reins of her mare, nudging the horse along with his. A few feet up the road he pulled them both to a slow trot and then turned off the path.

He handed Icení back control of her horse.

"It looks very quiet, very desolate here. How long has it been since the house was last used?" she asked.

"One, two centuries. Not more."

"Centuries? How can you think this place is suitable protection for a vampire when it hasn't been used in so long? Have you gone daft?"

"Only in your presence, your highness." He was getting the best of her and he enjoyed watching her cheeks flush bright red and the fiery glint of anger sparkling in her eyes. He was captivated by Icení's never-ending beauty. Even in a fit of annoyance, his princess was all woman, and he enjoyed the show more than he would have thought he could.

"I really had not planned on taking an extra night when we set out, Donovan. I had hopes of reaching Vastos's estate before sunrise. We didn't need that encounter with Brooks."

Several small cottages popped up from behind a series of brambling hedges and overgrown vines. "If you have a better solution, then pray tell, for I am all ears."

Icení looked away and let out a deep breath.

Donovan reined his horse to a complete stop and dismounted. "The small house in the center sits above an old vault once used to store weapons. The others have no subterranean levels."

He walked over to the mare and reached up to help Icení down. The feel of her small waist in his hands sent a fierce desire to his heart insisting he never let go of her again. The notion he could want to be so protective of another living being startled him. After his father had died, no one else had

ever really mattered to him. Concerning himself with a stranger, a quasi not even of his own blood, was more than a mere shock to his senses. Stepping back, he removed his hands from Icenis's waist. He stared at her, his heart beating wildly.

She adjusted her waistcoat and looked the other way. "I did not need your help," she said.

"No, I am sure you did not. But I fear it is too late, as you are on your feet and off your horse. I cannot take back my actions."

He led the horses to a small covered stall not far from the row of thatched cottages.

"What if someone finds the horses during daylight?"

"The path here is well hidden. Besides, the road we traveled is not used as much as the main one. I have no reason to think we will not be safe here."

She gave the horses a concerned glance.

"I will not tether them to the post," he said. "If need be, they will leave, concealing our presence."

"And how will we get to Vastos?"

"The horses have been trained by Itycan stable hands, me and Conor. If no danger occurs during the day, they will wait for us to return. If a problem arises, they will find their way back to Dun Sidhe and warn Simpson."

"Oh." She bit her bottom lip, and the action made Donovan's groin ache.

He let out a deep breath and raked a hand through his hair. "I think it best we get inside now, Icenis. Finding the vault may not be all that easy."

Frowning, she shot him a frustrated look. "Why is that not a surprise?"

He took her by the hand and led her through the thick shrubs and prickly vines. Tangles of green and brown roots and leaves weaved their way in an intricate design of organic chaos.

Donovan punched and hacked with his hands, severing several feet of dead brush. Stepping over a fallen tree, he saw the dirt path leading to the middle cottage.

He turned around and helped Icení over the downed tree. "Not much further now," he said.

She wiped her hands over her pants, dusting off a menagerie of leaves and twigs that had stuck through the fabric's weave. Donovan waited in silence, watching her every move. She gazed up at him, apparently noticing his stare. He didn't know what to say. "I certainly hope none of the brush was poisonous."

She furrowed her brow. "Donovan Bramwell, you are the worst rogue I have ever met."

"I take that as a compliment, then."

"It was not meant as one."

He turned away, refusing to comment any more and headed toward the house. The front door opened with ease, its lock worn and rusted. "The vault is at the far end, under the floor."

As the first streaks of sunlight shot through the one window on the sidewall, he made his way across the room. The sudden beam of light helped him spot the metal ring used to lift the vault's lid. He thanked the gods he didn't have to go

searching through centuries of dust and decay. Bending down, he pulled upward on the trap door. The wood plank rose with ease, but it sent a dust cloud smoking through the air.

He waved a hand in front of his face and coughed. As the dust settled, he turned to face Icení.

"I cannot stay here," she said.

"We have no choice."

"You don't understand, Donovan. I cannot sleep in there."

"You sleep in crypts, for the gods' sake. How can this be any worse?"

She stood frozen by the door, her feet looking as if they were glued to the floor. She shook her head, sending ringlets of black tresses flying about her face.

Donovan crossed the room. He reached out his hands and placed them gently on her arms. "Icení, you are truly trembling."

"That place," she said, pointing with her still glove-covered hand, "is no different from the secret box I hid in when the Roman's invaded my father's castle. Do not make me get in there, Donovan. Please, I beg of you."

He pulled her close to his chest and ran a hand over the back of her head, his fingers lacing through her long strands of hair. "It is all right, Icení. I would never dream of making you sleep in a place that frightens you." He didn't know what else to do. The cottage offered no other protection from the sun, and by the looks of the sunbeams already filtering into the room the day would prove to be one of full daylight. He cursed to himself.

Scanning the room with a quick glance, he took stock of their surroundings. He needed to find a spot that offered shelter from the sun, but nothing that resembled a square wood-planked box.

Iceni's labored breaths warmed his chest. He wrapped his arms tighter around her body. "We can sleep in the loft."

She lifted her head away from him. "Where?"

"Up there." He pointed to a small platform above the main floor. "It will shield us from direct sun. The only opening is on the side. If I can manage to break the door from the vault free from its hinges, then I think we can use it as a barrier against any beams of sunlight that may filter into the area. The loft should be high enough from the window to avoid direct sunlight."

Iceni backed away and nodded, apparently agreeing with him.

Donovan went back to the vault area and fiddled with the rusted hinges. After several attempts to loosen the rusted metal, he pulled free the pins and then the door.

"Come," he said, making his way up the narrow set of steps. Iceni followed him and settled into the far corner.

He placed the wood plank over the opening to the loft. "I think that will do."

He sat down next to her and removed his jacket and waistcoat. "A waistcoat makes for a good temporary pillow and the jacket a good blanket."

She followed him, doing the same with her own garments.

Donovan watched her in silence, as she made her makeshift bed. "Are you settled now?"

She nodded but said nothing. He turned his back to her and tried to get as comfortable as the situation permitted.

Once settled, he listened for her breathing. She had come to her senses rather well, he thought, considering her fears. And fears she well should have. He hated seeing her so upset, so frightened. If only he could hold her tight this very moment, keep her close and safe.

He suddenly felt Icen's warm body snuggle against his. She inched her way closer, wrapping her arm around his waist. He smiled to himself. If he didn't know better, he would swear his Celtic princess could read his mind.

He wrapped his arm over hers and pulled her tight against his back. The feel of her steady heartbeat was like a soft lullaby sung only for him. The rhythmic drumming lulled him, and slowly but surely, he felt the heavy darkness of daylight sleep take over his body. His own breathing slowed, and his heartbeat faded. In a matter of moments, the vampire within took over his quasi existence and sent him off to the sound world of sleep.

* * * *

Vastos returned from the crypt, his body spent and his base desires well sated. He paced the floor of his room, a nervous tick jumping in his jaw. Still slouched in a chair at the foot of his bed, his annoying mage slept, just as he had left the man. He thanked the dark gods for allowing him a bit of peace away from the mage. The man had become a nuisance lately. Vastos already hated being followed around by an entourage, let alone a silly mage who treated him as if he

were a frail child on the verge of greeting his deathbed. He'd merely muddled a bite, nothing more. And once Donovan made his way to the estate, he'd remedy the situation once and for all.

The thought of finally claiming the Ceni relic satisfied his greedy side. Despite the fact he now needed the ancient powers to merely survive, the idea of completing what he had left undone almost two millennia ago, pleased him. Once he claimed the Ceni powers, mayhap he'd be strong enough to do something about his own situation back in Upyra. Having to play heir apparent to a Queen of the undead meant his true destiny would never come to fruition. His mother simply had to give him more authority over the realm. Mayhap his actions against Donovan and the Ceni princess would help elevate his position in his mother's eyes. If it didn't, he'd take matters into his own hands. One way or another, he was ready to rule a kingdom and no one was going to stand in his way, not his nephew, or his mother, Queen Upyra.

Vastos smiled to himself. If he acted in a wise manner, he could have the best of both worlds—Donovan's and Upyra's. Life finally seemed to be getting a bit more palatable, even from his miserable, undead state. He wanted to think more of what his next move would be, but a sudden desire to succumb to the deep sleep washed over his body and his mind. He could barely keep his eyes open. His mage slept often, both during the day and the night. But rarely did he, the great Vastos of Upyra ever succumb to the hours of daylight. This tie to Donovan Bramwell's soul was really starting to annoy him now. He wanted to live through his

nephew to enjoy the mortal side of life, not fall prey to its weaknesses, such as sleep. He lived by no set rules, especially those set by others, namely the gods. Failing to fight his present urge for sleep, Vastos fell back upon his bed and allowed the world of nightmares to claim his soul.

Chapter Seventeen

Vastos drummed his fingers against the windowpane, his mind focused on two souls he sensed near the edge of his estate. They were coming his way. He'd also sensed their presence in his sleep, the deep abyss that had claimed him during the past day. He hadn't slept so deeply in ages, but he welcomed the refreshed state in which he had awakened. Mayhap Donovan slept as well. The thought, like all the others connected to his nephew, unsettled him, yet intrigued him. The daylight hours had been the first he had ever slept without experiencing horrific nightmares. A part of him missed the hellish scenes he'd become so accustomed to witnessing in his sleep. He wondered if they were gone forever.

His mind wandered back to the quasi essence he sensed lingering near his estate. A unique breed of quasis offered a soul the opportunity to experience life as both mortal and vampire. The rare mix of life and death entwined in one existence enticed Vastos, and he lingered at the window, his soul reaching out to the intruders now moving closer to the castle. To experience the lush chaos of Donovan's existence sent shivers down his spine. Even sex with his mates couldn't come close to what he could experience living more completely through Donovan's soul and blood. The thought of such a life whetted his dark appetite.

A knock at the door broke his concentration. He turned as his mage, who'd been jarred from his sleep, squirmed like a confused fool.

"'Tis only the door, mage, nothing more." He frowned. The silly man failed at handling everything save for his foul smelling concoctions.

"My lord?" A voice called from the other side of the chamber door. "Tis your head guard, Parthalán."

"Come," Vastos said.

The door opened and a burly looking guard stepped inside the room. Vastos dismissed his mage with a wave of his hand.

The mage hesitated, and Vastos said, "I am not upon death's door yet, man. Now go. I can survive without your constant shadow for a few moments, I assure you."

The mage frowned, but he knew better than to protest. Leaving the room, he closed the door behind him.

"Forgive me for intruding, my lord," Parthalán said when the mage was gone, "but I have a most urgent message for you from the guard."

Vastos crossed the room, his boots barely touching the Persian carpets piled atop the tiled floor. "They are called quasis, Parthalán. Souls made up of both mortal and Vampyric essences."

Vastos noted the look of surprise upon the man's face, but he refrained from commenting, searching his mind. He had no desire to expend energy in his present rejuvenated state. Peaceful sleep apparently agreed with him, and he desired to revel in its lasting effects for as long as possible.

"You are aware of the intruders?" Parthalán asked.

"I know all things that concern my realm."

The man swallowed. "Forgive me, my lord. I did not mean to bother you, then." He took a step backward, apparently preparing to take his leave.

"Wait," Vastos said. "Tell me, Parthalán, in your own words, what your guards had to say. Humor me." He pulled out the chair from his desk and offered it to the guard. The man stiffened and remained standing. "Do you think it wise to refuse my hospitality, Parthalán?"

The guard hesitated, and Vastos smiled to himself. He enjoyed toying with other souls.

A stray bead of blood sweat traveled down the man's face. "Forgive me, my lord. I meant no disrespect. I've never been offered a seat in your presence, that is all."

Vastos pulled the chair away, shrugging.

"Two souls," Parthalán said, "both upon horses. They were spotted in the vicinity of Lord Barr's estate prior to dawn. Apparently they took shelter during the day, since my guards have not seen them since."

"Did Brooks allow them passage on his lands?"

Parthalán shook his head. "I do not believe so, my lord. Edward Brooks has been assaulted and is now lying flat out cold in his fields."

His damnable neighbor had failed once again. Edward Brooks was becoming a true pain as of late, and Vastos knew he needed to settle matters with the man before he caused any serious damage. As dark prince of the Upyran vampire realm, he couldn't have a mortal ruining his plans.

"These quasis are here for a specific reason," Vastos stated. "When they arrive, let them pass onto my lands. I want no guard to stop them. Not at the gates, not at the wooded entrance, and certainly not once inside my home."

Parthalán dropped his gaze to the floor. "But my lord, how are we to capture them if we allow them to wander freely about the estate?"

Vastos turned back to the window. He crossed the room and leaned his body against the window frame, pushing out the Gothic-shaped panel of small glass panes into the night air. A cool breeze entered the room. "Tell me Parthalán, do you miss the Ceni?"

"My lord?"

Vastos sensed the vampire's confusion. "I rescued you from the Roman barbarians and allowed you to live a mortal life, a very privileged mortal life, until you were the ripe old age of thirty and five. Then I brought you across to the vampire. Did I not?"

"Yes, you did, my lord. And I shall always be grateful to you for such a gift."

"Then tell me, do you ever think of them?"

The man didn't answer.

Vastos turned back to face him. "Do you?"

"The Ceni, my lord?"

"Yes, those vile, ignorant bastards who gave life to you the first time around."

The guard shook his head.

"And why not?"

The vampire took a deep breath, his eyes still fixed on the floor. "Because they were good for nothing people, a tribe that went against their word."

Vastos's lips curled. "Good. Then you would have no problem pledging your loyalty to me over a Ceni, should one still exist?"

The man swallowed hard. "Of course not, my lord. You are the only master I now honor."

Vastos stepped away from the window. He approached Parthalán, circling the man over and over again, sensing the vampire's increasing heartbeat. His boots wore a track in the carpet beneath his feet.

Finally, he came to a stop in front of the guard. He reached a hand to the man's chin and raised his face to meet his gaze head on. "Do not toy with me Parthalán. I have no use for lying bastards."

"I ... I have no reason to lie, my lord. You are the only master I have."

"Would you swear it upon your dead mother's soul?"

The guard nodded.

Vastos dropped his hand away. "Good. Then I am glad you will have no trouble in killing the princess Icení."

The man gasped.

"Is something wrong, Parthalán?"

"No, my lord. I just had no idea any royal Ceni still lived."

"No, you wouldn't. But the princess does indeed exist, and she does so in flesh and blood. A life I should have been living." He sighed. The quasi essence stirred his soul again.

"When you sensed them, did their unique state of being elate or disappoint you?"

Parthalán bit his bottom lip. "If truth be known, my lord, the feeling was most euphoric. I felt as if my very soul teetered on the brink of both death and life at the same time. It is a feeling unrivaled by any other."

Vastos smiled. And to think soon such a feeling would be his to share with all those he had created. "Instruct your guard to hide in the shadows. I want Icení and my damned nephew to walk right into my home and my trap. Once they are far enough inside my world, then your men shall ambush them. I want them trapped so there is no possible way they can escape."

"I will notify the guard, sir."

"Icení is to be killed, and the Cení relic is to be taken from her neck and brought to me immediately. Her body is to be delivered to my brides."

"And your nephew?" Parthalán asked. "What shall become of him, my lord?"

"I want Donovan well sedated, and shackled. Then, I want him brought to me here in this very room. Not a hair on his head is to be touched. Is that understood? Donovan is not to be harmed, save for being drugged, in any way."

"As you wish, my lord."

Vastos waved a finger in front of Parthalán's face. "No, man. Not as I wish, but as your honor so deems."

The man took a deep breath and his mouth opened, but no words came forth.

"Are you having trouble pledging your loyalty to me, Parthalán?"

The guard shook his head.

"I did not think so. Now go."

Parthalán headed toward the door.

"Oh, and one more thing," Vastos said.

The vampire guard stopped in his tracks and looked back at his master.

"If you fail me, in any way, Parthalán. I will have your heart and your head."

"Understood, my lord."

The vampire guard reached for the doorknob and unlatched the lock. He disappeared into the hallway with the speed of a flying bat.

Vastos laughed to himself. He liked toying with his servants' minds. If only Donovan would prove as easy.

* * * *

Magnus tapped his boot-covered foot against the tile floor, sending a light echo through the chamber.

Luther huffed. "It really is quite annoying when you do that, Magnus."

The council leader stopped fidgeting. "I hate waiting. What if something happens to them? I think we should send in a small group of warriors, just to be sure Donovan is safe. Maybe a few vampyric Dead Walkers." Magnus rose from his chair.

Luther flew across the room on the instant, blocking the elder quasi from taking another step forward. "I think we

should obey our leader's wish and remain here until due time has passed."

Magnus dipped his head. He lowered his glasses and stared Luther square in the eyes. "Is there something you are not telling, me? Did Donovan confide in you something he does not wish the council to know?"

Luther let out a deep breath. "Why do you always insist on thinking something sinister is going on?"

"'Tis my job."

"He told me nothing," Luther answered. "In truth, I wish he had. Then I would not be as worried as you."

Magnus's lips curved into a smile. "Then you are just as unsure of this as am I. Good. I am calling for a small group of warriors to be dispatched."

Luther hated when Magnus got on his nerves, pushing him to the brink of losing his patience. He flexed his fingers, and then he curled them into a tight fist, raised his arm and took a good swing at Magnus's face, hitting the man straight in the jaw.

The elder quasi fell to the floor.

Luther caught Magnus before he crashed onto the hard tiles. "Sorry, dear friend. But you left me no choice."

Now, he knew not only would the gods make him pay for his actions, but so would Magnus when he regained consciousness. Luther prayed Donovan would be back by then. Facing an angered Magnus wasn't in Luther's plans.

Chapter Eighteen

Iceni rose at dusk, and she and Donovan traveled for several hours before arriving at the far end of Vastos's estate. She was thankful for Donovan's makeshift shield that kept the sun from filtering into their sleeping area. She only wished she had not allowed him to see her in so vulnerable a state. She'd acted like a child at the cottage, fearing something that had happened almost two millennia ago. She silently chided herself and vowed she would never fear small places again.

She reined her horse to a slow trot. The dead silence disturbed her soul and made her senses go on full alert. As a light, prickling sensation assaulted her skin, she forced her preternatural abilities to take over, scanning the area with both her vampyric night vision and acute hearing. She didn't like the feel of things. Vastos's estate was quieter than she had remembered it being on any of her previous visits, and quiet for the dark lord wasn't a good thing. "Something isn't right, Donovan."

He nudged his horse closer to her. "Enlighten me."

"I sense no guards in the area. We should have encountered at least one by now."

"Mayhap his men are hiding," Donovan said.

"I think not. Vastos would have had us captured by now had he had the chance."

She reined her mare to a stop. "Let us take the rest of the path by foot and leave the horses here." She dismounted,

sliding from her saddle to the ground, her boots landing on a footing of gravel.

"You seem at ease with giving out orders, my lady. What makes you think I would agree with you?"

She frowned and rolled her eyes. "I should have expected you to respond in such a way, being the rogue that you are. But if truth be known, I am indeed quite capable of handing out orders and ruling a realm. I am my father's daughter, even if he was killed when I was but a child."

Donovan dismounted from his horse and sent both animals into the forest. He turned to her and said, "They will return when we need them."

"How can you be so sure?"

"They are trained to sense my heartbeat. When they feel it, they will respond to my call."

The notion piqued Iceni's interest. "You train your animals as you train your household staff?"

"In a sense, yes." Donovan walked away from her, taking the lead in their trek up the windy dirt path.

A crisscross of moonbeams zigzagged over the road, making an odd pattern on the path. Iceni followed him, careful not to fall behind more than a step or two. If Donovan's belief that Vastos had his men hidden in the area, putting a physical distance between herself and the Lord Protector wouldn't make for a wise choice.

"How many guards are usually posted past the road?"

"Several," she answered. "Sometimes as many as ten, other times as few as five. It depends on what they expect, I would imagine."

"Vastos is a wise soul. He changes his guard so no enemy can ever truly know what they will encounter."

"Either that or he doesn't give much attention to things."

Donovan laughed. "Hardly. The man makes a point to know everything that goes on in his realm. I do not believe such a character would be so careless as not to check on his guards from time to time. The path is empty tonight for a reason."

Iceni stopped mid-stride. "Then he senses us, knows we are here?"

Donovan shrugged. "Just a guess."

She didn't like the idea of being played the fool. Who did Vastos think he was? Even after all these years, she still held bitter contempt for the evil vampire. "He will not capture me. I swear it upon my soul, Donovan. Vastos will not take me as his prisoner. He's already done enough damage to my people, and I won't allow him to take the last living Ceni. If he did, it would be the ultimate victory for him."

Donovan stopped and turned to face her. "I won't let him take you. I give you my word, Iceni. If it is the last thing I do, I will secure your freedom over mine. And while we are on the subject, what exactly did you mean before when you said you would take back the Ceni relic regardless of the cost?" He raised an eyebrow in question, staring at her head on.

"I ... meant..." She paused. To tell the man he had gotten the best of her wasn't a good choice. "I meant nothing by it. Nothing at all." She pushed past him and headed for the end of the path.

"Where do we go from this point? Do you know where the children are kept?" Donovan stared out ahead of them, turning his head toward the large stone manor home sitting in the nearby distance.

"The children are housed in an old infirmary at the other side of the property. Vastos lives in the manor house over the far hill." Icení mentally calculated a rough estimate of the size of the open field lying in front of them. "I have never made my way across the lot to the house or the children's quarters on foot. I have always taken to the air, landing on the rooftop or making my way through an open window."

"Even in the dark of night," Donovan said, nodding his head, "I think taking to the air is indeed a better way to travel than by foot. At least in bat form, we might not be so easily detected as quasis."

In a matter of mere seconds, Icení took a flying leap off the ground and up into the air. She circled the field several times, hoping to sense where Vastos had hidden his guards, but all that came into view was a dark, open space. Knowing time was a luxury she didn't have, Icení flew toward the infirmary building and scanned an area where she and Donovan could land. Seeing several open windows, she opted for the one on the highest level. If for some reason she needed to be in mortal form and couldn't change back to a bat, 'twas always easier to run down the stairs in the midst of an escape than to run up them. She dove into a dimly lit room on the top floor of the building, shapeshifted back to human form, and scanned the chamber.

Donovan appeared at her right, bracing one hand protectively about her waist, and the other gripping the pistol at his side.

The room was empty and sparsely furnished. Icen surveyed the area trying to use the least amount of her powers as possible. A dim light filtered in from beneath a door. She reached for the pocket of her waistcoat and froze.

"Donovan," she whispered in a frantic voice, her hands searching her own body. "I have lost my pistol."

"Are you certain?"

She nodded. The weapon was nowhere on her. "It must have fallen back on the path, as I shapeshifted."

He let out a deep breath and pulled her closer. "Do not fret. I still have mine."

A chill ran down her spine, and an overwhelming power of dread assaulted her soul. "Did you feel that? Sense that odd presence?"

Donovan wrapped his hand tighter about her waist. "Your highness, I do not think we are alone."

She gave a faint laugh. "Then lucky for me that I am in the company of a man so acutely aware of his surroundings." She knew now was not the time to tease, but her jittery nerves forced her to make light of the situation.

Donovan didn't comment. He took her by the hand and quietly led her to a nearby door.

"Be careful," she said as his fingers clutched the knob. "What if it is a trap?"

"Then it is a chance we will have to take." Donovan turned the doorknob and the latch clicked. A slight crack echoed through the air.

Iceni inched her way behind Donovan, following him out into a torch-lit hallway. A murmur of voices rose from somewhere down below. The echoing sounds appeared to be those of cheerful children playing and laughing as they ran about a large room. She hadn't remembered the children so happy in the past. But she had only come to Vastos's estate during daylight hours, while storm clouds brewed in the sky above, blocking out the sun. She believed the children must have been with tutors at the time, as rumors said Vastos insisted on educating his slaves. Regardless of the situation, however, Iceni kept close to Donovan. She continued to inch her way along the hallway slowly, following him every step of the way.

Donovan turned a corner and then suddenly pulled back.

"What is wrong?"

"The staircase is opened to the floor below on both sides of the steps," he said. "Someone will notice us."

A bell rang out from the area where the children played. A sudden halt in their happy voices disturbed Iceni. The house grew quiet. Not a single noise could be heard from below or from anywhere else, for that matter. The eerie silence struck Iceni's soul, sending a cold shiver down her back.

Footsteps rattled the stairway next to where she stood.

Pulling her along with him, Donovan dashed down the hall and back to the room from which they had originally come. Together, they slipped inside the chamber just as countless

lines of children filed past them in a straight, processional line.

Opening the door a crack, Icení watched the children's somber faces. One by one, they marched in a row, breaking the chain only when they arrived at what she assumed were their own rooms. She counted four to a chamber, not a single more.

Every child seemed to appear the same to her. Thin, black shiny hair, lanky frames, matching suits ... A sudden revelation struck a chord in her brain. The building she and Donovan had chosen to enter apparently only housed boys. If Conor's son was among the captives here, then she and Donovan had found the right house. She said nothing, for fear of being overheard, until the last of the children had passed.

"They are gone," she said, pulling away from the door. "Did you note they were all boys?"

Donovan nodded. "And only a handful had flaxen hair."

"I wonder where they keep the girls." The notion of more children being held captive upset Icení. If only boys were kept here, then surely there had to be yet another building with just as many young girls.

"Knowing Vastos, he has split the children up for safekeeping from his enemies," Donovan said. "I doubt he would be fool enough to put all his captives in one place."

She had to agree, since the notion made the most sense.

A set of heavy footsteps echoed in the outer corridor. Icení walked back to the door, curious to see what she and Donovan might be facing.

A bulky man, tall, muscled, and with an air of authority, passed by the chamber. He made his way to the far end of the hall and then turned. Icení heard a gruff voice mumble in the distance, but she couldn't quite make out the words. She pressed her ear closer to the open space between the door and its frame.

"What do you hear?" Donovan asked.

She motioned for him to approach the door. She moved out of the way, giving Donovan her space. "Listen to the language. It is not Upyran."

Donovan leaned his head to one side and shut his eyes.

Icení noted the look of deep concentration dancing across his face.

"It is an ancient tongue," he said.

Icení pulled him back from the door. "It is a form of the Cení language."

"Are you positive?"

She let out a sigh, and rolled her eyes. "Of course I am positive. Do you take me for a mutton-headed idiot who does not know her own tongue when she hears it?"

"Forgive me, but I thought you said there were no Cení still alive, other than the few who had descended from other parts of the tribe."

"Mayhap I have made a mistake."

He grabbed hold of her arm. "We don't have room for mistakes, your highness. In case it has not been made clear to you, we are not playing a game. Your life and mine, and the entire Protectorate for that matter, is at stake here."

She pulled her arm free from his grasp and walked away. "I cannot explain what I heard, but I do know it is a form of Ceni. Mayhap Vastos uses the language for his guards."

Donovan stared at Iceni, his mind whirling in a million directions at once. "What do you mean he uses Ceni for his guards?"

"I did not think it important at the time, but upon my last visit, I thought I overheard a head guard speaking Ceni. It was only a brief word or two, so I was never sure if my ears had indeed heard what I thought, or if they heard what I wanted them to hear. Now I know Ceni was spoken on that day."

Donovan raked a hand through his hair. "So, I am in my greatest enemy's house, facing guards who speak an ancient language you just happen to know." He threw his hands up in disgust, wondering what the princess would pull next, what hidden secret she had yet to play. "I am going to look for Conor's son. Apparently Vastos keeps the children on Vampyric time. I can sense the sun in the distance. With the children sleeping, it will be easier for me to move about and find Samuel. I want you to stay here until I return. Then we will find shelter together, until we can leave here."

"No," she protested. "I want to go with you."

He shook his head. "It is far too dangerous. If I am caught you will have to go back to Dun Sidhe and notify Simpson."

She looked at him with pleading eyes, but said nothing.

He retrieved the pistol from his waistcoat pocket. "Here, I want you to take this."

"No," she argued. "I am safe here. You will be in more danger out there."

Donovan shoved the pistol and the small pouch of stakes, into her hand. "In case you haven't noticed, your highness, I have difficulty taking no for an answer."

She sighed, but accepted the weapon.

"I will get the Ceni relic. I give you my word," Donovan said.

Then he slipped through the door and headed toward the first of many rooms he had to search.

Iceni held her breath and stared at the weapon in her hand. No man had ever risked as much for her as Donovan had. The thought that he would venture into danger unarmed, to save a child and to retrieve her Ceni relic, won him a place in her heart for all times. If only she could have had Itycan blood in her veins...

Even though she knew there was no chance that she and Donovan could spend eternity together, she knew that after tonight, Donovan Bramwell was one soul she'd never forget. She prayed to the gods he would come out of this mess alive, for she knew firsthand what atrocities Vastos was capable of committing. And knowing Donovan was probably the dark lord's greatest enemy, she prayed he had enough powers to overcome an encounter with the Upyran prince. If he didn't, they were all doomed.

Chapter Nineteen

Donovan dashed from room to room, searching for Samuel, Conor's son. In his shapeshifted form, he managed to crawl into each dormitory through the small space between the room's door and the floor. Then he flew above and surveyed the children in their beds, his preternatural sight taking over his hampered mortal vision.

The chambers seemed to be arranged in age order, the first of the rooms belonging to babes still in cradles, the second group to tots around Samuel's age. The thought of a child being taken from his parents at such an early age pained Donovan, sending a bolt of anger straight to his heart. Vastos had no right to take slaves, and then take their children from them. Once he saw Conor's son to safety, he would insist the Protectorate intervene in the situation.

Based on the line of children who had marched down the main corridor earlier, Donovan estimated he would have to search at least a dozen or so rooms before finding Samuel. But after coming upon the first room housing children of an older age, Donovan's heart sank.

Mayhap he had missed the boy in his stressed state. He went back, searching each room a second time. Halfway between the first and the last dormitory he had visited previously, he found a single empty bed.

He scanned the room from the ceiling, sensing four souls in the chamber, but there were only three occupied sleeping areas. He stared at the one empty bed, its blanket and sheet

folded down. Each boy had a pair of slippers tucked away neatly at the side of their beds. Donovan glanced back to the vacant sleeping space, two tiny slippers stuck haphazardly out from beneath the bed.

Donovan descended to the floor in silence, cautious not to wake the sleeping tots. In full mortal form, he lay down on the rug.

To his amusement, beneath the bed lay a small boy, his hands wrapped tightly about a stuffed bear. The boy's small mouth curved in a smile as he stared back at Donovan. Conor's aura instantly resonated with Donovan's soul. He had finally found his dear friend's son. But to remove the child without disturbing the others could prove difficult.

Donovan returned to his shapeshifted form and paced the air, flying back and forth, his mind's wheels turning in various directions. He eyed the open window and debated. In his present state, the boy would be too heavy to lift. Yet, in mortal form, he would be forced to cross the room and use the door, thus risking the chance of waking the other tots and alerting the guards. He swooped back down to the floor and returned to a mortal shape. He reached for the boy beneath the bed.

The tiny tot gurgled and smiled, coming to him willingly. The boy's innocent actions stirred Donovan's soul. He made haste for the door, but then he stopped a foot or so away from the bed. *The bloody bear*. He'd forgotten the tot's toy under the bed.

He hesitated. At Dun Sidhe, Conor could buy the boy a new bear. But what if the stuffed bear was the only article the

child could identify with at present? His heart struggled with his head.

Giving an annoyed huff, Donovan turned around and went back to the empty bed. He bent carefully, so as not to bump the child's head, and then reached under the bed, grabbing hold of the brown, furry toy.

The babe gurgled a second time, his plump cheeks lighting with delight at the sight of the stuffed toy. Donovan's heart split in two. He wrapped a hand carefully around the child's head and made a beeline back toward the door. Thanking the gods that it had not closed correctly when the children had been sent to bed, Donovan slipped the toe of his boot through the small space and quietly shoved the door open.

He eyed the hallway for passing guards. None were in sight.

Making sure the child was still secure in his arms, Donovan dashed from the dormitory to the room where Icení waited. Crossing the threshold, he closed the door behind him, leaned against it and let out a sigh of relief.

Icení came to his side on the instant. "He's so small," she said, smiling at Conor's son.

"I don't think he was treated properly between the time he was sold and the time he came here."

A tear glistened in Icení's eye, and Donovan handed her the child.

Icení cradled the boy in her arms, looking much as Donovan had imagined she would look with a babe of her own. The tiny tot responded to her on the instant, smiling and making silly laughs.

"You must take him to Bramwell Abbey," Donovan said.
"Now."

Iceni stared up at him, shock and disappointment veiling her face. "But the Ceni relic."

"There is no time to argue with me. Take the boy to safety, and I will remain here to deal with Vastos."

"I will not leave you."

"One of us has to see to the boy's safety and it cannot be me."

Iceni let out a deep breath. "And why not? What if I stayed and you took the child to the Abbey."

He laughed. "I think not. Besides, Vastos inflicted the bite upon my neck. If I don't settle the matter with him, I am certain my soul will fall to the Upyran cause or worse."

Iceni squinted and backed away. "You lied. You said Vastos had nothing to do with the bite marks upon your neck."

"I had no choice at the time."

"You had all the choice you needed." Anger and hurt filled Iceni's voice, but Donovan could do nothing to soothe her at the moment. He needed to find Vastos. In the end, he would explain everything to her, but for now, time refused him such a luxury.

"Take the child and leave," Donovan said. "Now, before someone notices the boy's empty bed."

Iceni glared at him. "I cannot carry him in the air."

"No, I realize that. You will have to go by foot and then find my horse in the wooded lot along the dirt path."

"But without you, the horses won't come."

"They know Conor's heart and his aura, and they will recognize his son's. The man helped me break the horses when they were wild."

"And what about the sun? I cannot travel in full daylight."

He cursed to himself. He needed to find a safe place for them. Visions of Brooks's estate came flooding back to him. "On the opposite side of the Marquis's land there is an old Protectorate post. It has not been used in years, but a cottage on the grounds still remains standing. I have used it often enough when I have taken to riding past dawn. A secure crypt rests beneath the small house. Find shelter there and wait for me."

Iceni held the tot close, her arms securely wrapped around the child's small body. Donovan hated to leave her. In truth, he hated to leave them both. But he had unfinished business to tend to, and if he failed in dealing with Vastos, they would all suffer or even, perhaps, end up dead.

"Once you are certain no one is in the vicinity, take the child from this building and don't stop until you reach the horses," he said. "Even if you think someone is following you, do not stop. Chances are, as a quasi, you can outrun them."

Iceni took a deep breath and stared down at the child. Then she looked back at Donovan. She said nothing, but her eyes conveyed a million words to his heart. Donovan had a feeling that should he indeed get out of the situation alive, he was in for a long talking to from the woman.

He grabbed hold of the doorknob behind his back. "And do not forget the pistol I gave you. It will work against the Upyran vampires. It was made specifically for that purpose."

Iceni nodded but remained silent.

Donovan turned the doorknob and slipped away from the room a second time. He prayed to the gods he had done the right thing by leaving Iceni and Conor's son. If anything happened to them, he'd never forgive himself.

* * * *

Vastos felt Donovan's presence coming nearer to his house. The close proximity of his nephew's quasi soul stirred his own. He reveled in the feel, the excitement, of walking the fine line between mortal death and Vampyric life. A chill ran down his spine and sent goose bumps over his flesh. The time for his ultimate victory was close at hand and the notion couldn't have pleased him more.

He ventured from his bedroom to his music room. Hiding away in the upper floor of his manor was a wise choice. Below, his slaves toiled to keep the place in tiptop shape, tending to mundane chores and keeping the vast lawns impeccably trimmed. He lived for chaos, but amid his personal surroundings, he craved absolute order. Nothing was ever amiss, not even his dratted herbal remedies. He cursed to himself as the clock struck another hour.

Leaning over the pianoforte, he reached for the small vial of liquid sitting on a tray atop a nearby table. He also pulled a crystal glass in his direction, filling it with the liquid and adding a touch of port. He downed the brew in a single gulp. A sudden rush of adrenaline zapped through his body. Every drink afforded him a short-lived dose of life. By the next strike of the clock, his energy would be drained once more.

Chapter Twenty

Iceni stood the tiny tot on the Persian area rug and headed to the window. She dipped her head outside to survey the vast expanse of rolling lawns that lay between the large manor house and the dirt path where Donovan had left his horses. Several guards emerged from a towerlike structure near the path and headed into a nearby cottage.

She ducked back into the room. Seeing guards outside for the first time since her arrival added an extra worry to her mind. She would have to make the trek on foot. If she were alone, the idea would not bother her half as much, but being responsible for another soul's life was an entirely different matter.

She reached for the pistol and pouch of stakes Donovan had given her. Opening the small pouch, she removed several stakes and slid one into the pistol's barrel. The remaining few stakes, she slipped into an outer pocket on the front of her waistcoat, wrapped the drawstring around her fingers and gave a tight pull, securing the pouch shut. She slipped the pouch back into the pocket opposite where she had previously put the first pistol and then also put Donovan's weapon inside, next to the bag of stakes.

She bent down, picked up the small boy and cradled him in her arms, tucking the stuffed bear inside his. He closed his eyes, his pudgy fingers gripping the bear's left foot.

Iceni's heart went out to him. The poor child had no clue how much danger he was in or what was to come. If only she could be as secure as the unknowing child appeared to be.

With tot in tow, she crossed the room and opened the door a crack. The hall still remained empty. She stepped outside and headed toward the stairs.

Descending to the floor below, she entered a large, barren chamber. Long, wooden tables, each paired with several sets of matching benches, lined the center of the room, forming numerous aisles. The room gave the appearance of a dining hall.

She searched the surroundings, and her soul detected the joyful aura of the happy children who had been there earlier. Their impressions were still visible enough to be detected by her weakening preternatural abilities. She wished she could save all the children, not just one.

Spinning on her heel, she headed down the center aisle of tables and benches. The wood furnishings blurred in her vision as she walked in haste, crossing the room. At the far end sat two large carved doors, standing like sentinels guarding their treasures.

Even before reaching the huge portal, she knew intuitively that the doors were locked. Her heart skipped a beat. She would have to turn around and find another way out of the room.

A sudden sense of fear filled her soul, and the hairs at her nape stood on end. She reached for the pistol in her pocket and withdrew the weapon. Wrapping her other arm tighter about Samuel's small body, she held him close.

A light hand touched her shoulder. She spun on her heel and raised the pistol automatically, pointing it. The sight that greeted her sent shockwaves zapping through her body. The woman standing before her stared at her with a look of confusion on her pale, thin face.

"Ophelia?" The name fell from Icen's lips with ease, but she knew not from where it had come.

The woman cocked her head to one side, then back to the other. Her long, black, flowing hair descended past her shoulders and mingled with the dark threads of her sheer gown.

A chill ran through Icen's blood. The woman's pale skin reminded her of a field of flawless snow, so pure, yet so cold. "Let me pass," Icen said.

The woman shook her head.

A second female flew down from above.

Then came a third.

Icen cursed to the high heavens. The faces of the vampires who now surrounded her were the same as those of the children she had once tried to save.

Visions of the past came flooding back to haunt her. Ceni was indeed the language she had heard spoken earlier. She'd lost her people once, and the thought of losing them again pained her. But she knew that Samuel's life came before the vampires standing in front of her. Even if they had once belonged to her beloved Ceni.

She raised the pistol and aimed it at Ophelia's heart. "I said let me pass."

"Do not give in," one of the other females cried, her voice like a shrieking lullaby, haunting Icení's ears.

Icení scanned the room, searching for a way out. Three vampires, one pistol. The odds weren't exactly in her favor. "Do not be a fool, Ophelia. Step aside and I will leave you be. But remain in your place and I will not think twice about staking you."

The silent vampire stared at her, searching her eyes, her soul. The odd connection between her and her enemy overwhelmed Icení.

The vampire took a step back, and Icení didn't hesitate. She made a mad dash across the room, jumping over several benches and leaping past the tables. As she leaped into the air, the pain of sharp fingernails dug at her back. She turned around and fired the pistol.

The vampire dropped to the floor, and Icení continued to run, while dipping her pistol-laden hand into her pocket and fumbling for another stake.

The sound of bat wings flapping in the air behind her grew close. She rested the pistol butt in the cradle of her pocket and jammed a second stake inside the barrel.

Clawlike fingernails raked through her hair, snarling the strands and snapping her head backwards. Icení shielded Samuel's body, raised the loaded pistol over her shoulder and pulled the trigger. A loud thud echoed in the air, as she felt her hair pull loose from the vampiress's claws.

She waited for the third woman to attack, but she didn't follow. Icení scurried through a doorway, entering another large chamber. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Ophelia

standing in the first room, her head still cocked to one side. The sight sent a chill down her spine.

Iceni crossed the room, her eyes fixed on the large doors at the far end. At the sound of voices descending from above, she froze in place, not knowing where to turn next. She couldn't get caught again. She simply would not allow Vastos to catch the last living Ceni.

Guards popped out from the shadows, lining the balcony overhead and pointing large wooden spears at her that could easily double as stakes. She knew the weapons well. The Upyrans had used the same spears to kill many of her tribe.

She scanned the room, desperate for a way out, even amid the glares of her enemies and their poised weapons.

The tall, muscled guard she had seen earlier in the hallway eyed her from above. The man descended the stairs, his men following his every move. A strong sense of authority emitted from the man's soul.

Iceni held back tears and fought her growing sense of fear, not wanting to give in to the Upyrans. But she had nowhere to run. Even if she could make a quick dash for it, with so many spears aimed her way, one would easily target her heart. She thought about the pistol in her pocket. The gun would do her no good with the number of guards already in view.

The head guard approached her, and he said in an authoritative voice, "Your highness, I fear you have come to the end of your journey."

"How do you know me?"

He didn't reply.

She swallowed hard, her heart seeming to lodge in her throat. "I won't give up the child. You will have to take him from me by killing me first."

The man motioned with a glove-covered hand for her to come closer. "Please, you know not with whom you are dealing."

She laughed. "I know full well who you are." She had known her enemies for more than eighteen hundred years, enough time to never forget them.

The man simply shook his head. He looked up at the guards surrounding the chamber from above. "Put down your weapons. The princess is now my captive."

"I am not your captive nor never will I ever be," she shouted.

The head guard ignored her.

An armed Upyran bolted down the stairs. "Sir, you cannot take the prisoner alone."

"It is Vastos's wishes that I do so. He gave strict orders the Ceni princess is to be dealt with by me and me alone."

The guard shifted his gaze from his leader to Icení, his stake-like spear still aimed at her heart.

"Do not disobey the dark lord's orders, man!" the head guard barked. "Lest his wrath fall upon you. Now drop your weapon and leave the matter to me."

The armed Upyran took a step back and lowered his weapon, but he still appeared to be poised for attack. He backed up the stairs, his eyes never leaving Icení's body. "I will do as you command, Parthalán, for I have no desire to disobey Vastos."

Hearing the head guard's name sent a stunned zap through Icení's soul. Vastos's chief at arms shared the same name as one of the Cení children she had tried to save from the Romans. The incident couldn't be more than a mere coincidence, Icení thought, convincing herself not to hope for that which she knew could never be. Parthalán had been one of her closest friends as a child.

A cold chill ran down her spine. She didn't trust the guard, but she had no other option. He'd just spared her from a horrible death.

"Will you now come with me, your highness?" Parthalán extended a gloved hand and waved his fingers for her to approach him. "As the dark lord so desires," Parthalán announced, gazing up to face the stares of his men still looking down from above. "I command you all to put away your weapons and return to your posts."

The guards, like zombies, finally did as their master had instructed. Icení remained in place, her eyes fixed on Parthalán.

"Your highness," the guard said in a whispered voice, "I am forever indebted to you for your courage in my days of youth. As is my sister Ophelia." He placed a hand over his heart. "I will see you free from here as my way of repaying your kindness to me."

A tear ran down her cheek. "I thought you dead. I remember you and your infant sister being carried away by the Romans."

"I fear I am dead, your highness. I have nothing left to lose, save you and the child in your arms."

The sudden realization of what the man was about to do startled her. Icení shook her head. "Will Vastos kill you for this? Or Ophelia? She let me pass when the others wouldn't."

"Please," he said. "The dark lord needs me more than I need him. And as for my sister, she is now the only bride Vastos has left."

A sense of relief calmed some of her fears. "I can help you and Ophelia," she said. "Do not stay with the Upyrans, please."

"Vastos rescued me from the Romans," Parthalán said. "I pledged my soul and that of my sister's to him. She was only an infant when we were captured, and it was best for both of us. We've lived a good life, your highness. And even though Ophelia was but a babe, I have always reminded her of the Cení ways. Besides, if I leave, who will watch the children?" He winked at her. "Now come, let me get you to the gatehouse before it is too late. When the guards find Vastos's dead wives in the great hall, they will search for you." Parthalán wrapped his arm about Icení's and led her to the main entrance of the house.

Descending the front steps, Parthalán directed Icení to a small towerlike structure on the west side of the main yard. "Dawn comes soon," he said. "You will have to remain here until I can secure your passage across the lawns."

Icení nodded, her mind ringing with visions of the past, concerns for the present, and hopes for the future. Donovan still remained inside and she had no idea of his present state.

Settling inside the tiny building, Icení made herself as comfortable as the situation allowed and cradled Conor's still sleeping son in her lap. "When will you return for us?"

Parthalán stared at her, a blank expression in his eyes. "I do not know. Mayhap in an hour, mayhap not until dusk."

She didn't like the sound of that. Waiting in Vastos's gatehouse made her feel like a sitting duck.

Parthalán shook his head, apparently aware of her feelings. "No one is allowed inside this building except for myself. Not even Vastos has a key."

The man's words comforted her to a slight degree, but she still remained on edge. Until she knew Donovan was safe, her own mind would not rest.

Chapter Twenty-one

A sharp pain pierced Vastos's soul. He'd been betrayed and there was no mistaking it, for the pain resembled that of a stake piercing the very core of his being. He hissed into the air and howled at the fleeting night. How could any of his people have committed such a sin? Had he not given them everything, even spared them Queen Upyra's wrath more times than naught? And now, two of his precious wives had been taken from him. He cursed the night. Where were his Dead Walkers when all this happened? Did none of his people care about all that he'd given them?

Gripping the edges of the pianoforte, he levered his body upright. Stiffly, he inched his way out of the room and back toward his bedchamber across the hall.

As he stepped over the threshold, he eyed the four-poster bed in the center of his private chamber. He wanted to lash out at Donovan, find the princess himself and make her suffer for his trials. But he was too upset to fight on his own. The loss of his wives pained him more than he could ever have imagined.

His fangs emerged, the tips grazing his tongue and drawing his own essence into his mouth. The salty, metallic tasting liquid coated his teeth and his lips. Haunting visions of ancient days came swirling back, teasing his mind. Had he not bitten Donovan, he'd know nothing of pain, of sadness, of loss. Life had been better before his mind had become

capable of feelings and emotions. The irony of the situation mocked him.

He took the final step leading him to the bed. Reaching his hands out in front of him, he pulled his body against the right end post and slouched over, his head hitting the carved wooden pole. Beads of blood blinded his eyes as they trickled down his face. The pain grew more intense, more devastating. He wondered if he'd survive the attack. Over the centuries he'd killed many mortals and vampires alike, but never had he felt remorse. For the first time in his existence he now knew how painful the death of a loved one could be. He had never known such suffering.

Making a last effort to find solace in the comfort of his bed, he took a single step forward, carefully pivoted on his heel and fell backwards, his body falling flat against the soft mattress.

He'd made up his mind. Quasi life was not what he desired after all.

And to remedy the situation, he would have to take the only solution the gods offered him—Donovan's life for his own.

* * * *

Donovan had wasted far too much time trying to find an unlocked exit in Vastos's large home. He thought about shapeshifting back to bat form, but he decided against it once he saw that all the windows and outer entranceways were sealed, preventing even the smallest of creatures from escaping. The dark lord had bolted every last door, save for a

small passageway leading from the kitchen to an outer alley behind the mansion.

Donovan ran down the dank-smelling corridor, the odor of waste and rotting food wafting to his nose. He slipped, his boot heel skidding in slime. Falling face first upon the earthen alleyway, Donovan felt a razor sharp pain jab at his neck. Cold, sticky liquid pumped from his veins, oozing down his collarbone and seeping into his clothing. The bite was bleeding again.

He swore a violent oath to the gods and then rose to his feet. Donovan decided that Vastos was going to pay for his agony, his grief, if it was the last thing he did.

He swung around the corner of the house, leaving the alley behind him. Marching over a small hill, he spotted a smaller version of the main house sitting in the distance. A dim light flared from the third floor.

In the sky above, the sun started to rise. Donovan took to the air in a single leap, his body shapeshifting into the night creature that ruled his soul. He flew through a hole in a broken window and landed on his feet.

The room spun. His neck still bled, and he swayed, his mind a flurry of confusion.

Voices echoed somewhere in the vicinity, and a blinding light flashed in his eyes. Then cold steel clamped against his wrists.

"Secure him good, and then take the bastard to Vastos, immediately," a deep voice said.

Shackles were wrapped around his ankles, and a blunt object struck his head. Donovan fell backwards, the breath

taken from his lungs. He saw nothing save for a bright, blinding light aimed directly at his eyes. Several pairs of rough hands pulled at his clothing, ripping his jacket, waistcoat and boots from his body. He struggled against his captors, but his attempts were futile. The shackles that were clamped over his wrists and ankles burned his flesh. *Pure silver.* Donovan cursed Vastos.

Water splashed against his face, searing his eyes. *Holy water.* The man had nerve.

"He's bleeding, sir," another voice called. "A bite."

A pair of gloved hands pushed his head to the side and poked at the open wounds on his neck. "We cannot 'ave 'im dead before he's presented to the master. Cauterize the holes."

A loud splash echoed in his ears, and then a steady stream of holy water flowed against the bleeding bite marks on his neck. He smelled the odor of his own flesh burning. He wanted to scream, to shout out in agony, but he held his tongue. Satisfying his captors would be a fate worse than descending into hell.

"'Tis still bleeding, sir."

The rush of water flowing against his neck slowed to a trickle, and then it stopped all together. The fibers of his skin sutured themselves, weaving a new layer over the burned area. Oozing blood seeped from the bite once more, this time heavier than before.

Fingers poked at his wounds, and an authoritative voice said, "Leave it be, and get him to Vastos before he dies."

Rough rope circled his neck and then squeezed against his flesh. *A noose.*

Donovan choked, and his captors laughed.

A hard tug pulled at the fiber leash wrapped around his neck. As his body was dragged along the floor, and up a narrow flight of stairs, he felt his already damaged skin peel away from his bones. He still could see nothing. His eyelids were swollen from the holy water, and his vision blinded by the bright light. But his preternatural senses were at their height, allowing him to feel every bruise, every burn, and see every impending torture with greater intensity. His back bled from being scraped upon the floor, and his shoulders were bruised and torn as his body was forced up the narrow staircase, his upper arms snapping against the spike-armed spindles.

Donovan prayed to the gods that Icení had made it safely to the horses. If Vastos needed him alive, he had no idea what fate would befall Icení, a soul who stood in the dark lord's way.

His captors stopped moving, and Donovan caught his breath and focused on the wounds inflicted upon his bloodied body. The small, insignificant scrapes healed on the instant, but the more serious injuries remained.

Heavy footsteps shook the floor beneath him. The heady scent of pungent herbs and spices assaulted his senses. The person approaching him had to be a mage, a man of medicine.

Cold, thin fingers probed his flesh, poking and jabbing as they worked their way around his body. "Who is responsible for this mess?"

No voice called out.

"Fine, I will see to the matter later. For now, bring the body to my chambers."

The noose at his neck tightened again, and his flesh ripped upon the floor.

"Not like that!" the mage called. "Pick him up, you bloody fools."

Rough hands gripped his body and hoisted him into the air. Fingers dug into his flesh, causing him additional pain, but it was nothing compared to being dragged naked across the splintery wood floors.

He felt his body fall as he was tossed upon a bed. Voices whispered in the distance, but by now, even his preternatural gifts were starting to fade, save for the intense manner in which he felt his pain.

A door closed, and the sound of footsteps grew closer. "I am master mage to Vastos, prince regent of Upyra."

Donovan moaned. He had no energy left to speak.

Cold cloths wiped at his flesh. "Your wounds will heal over time. But I fear before that moment arrives, you must face your uncle."

Donovan welcomed that announcement, despite his present state of agony.

"I will apply various poultices to help speed the healing process. Many will burn, mayhap even worse then the wound they mean to heal."

The man didn't lie. A few minutes later, Donovan sucked in a deep gulp of air as steaming herbs were packed into his gaping wounds. He tried to scream, but to his shock, his voice failed him. The mage spent what seemed like an eternity mashing at Donovan's torn flesh, pinching and pulling. By the time the man finished his work, Donovan burned from the inside out, from his head to his feet. Not an inch of his body had been left unscathed. He cursed Vastos and the entire Upyran realm, and a sudden need for brutal revenge overwhelmed him. Now, more than ever, he understood Icen's plight. If this was what was done to a soul Vastos desired unharmed, Donovan could only imagine what tortures had been inflicted upon Icen's sisters and family. Vastos would indeed pay for his actions.

Chapter Twenty-two

Donovan woke at dusk, the deep daylight hours of sleep having claimed him hard. His head ached, and his body was sore to the touch. When he took a deep breath, a stabbing pain shot through his lungs. Vivid images of dreamlike scenes filled his head, reminding him he'd been captured and tortured.

He opened his eyes and squinted. His vision remained blurry, the soft light of a candle flame sending a sharp ache through his eyes and head. He reached a hand up to his face and ran his fingers over his skin. The burns from the holy water had faded and soft flesh grew in their place. His fingers eased their way downward and across his neck, two small bumps rubbed against the pad of his thumb. The bite scars were protruding, but the bleeding had apparently stopped. He thanked the gods for having shown him at least that small amount of mercy.

He pushed up, trying to lever his body into a sitting position, but his arms failed to support his weight. Angered and annoyed, he huffed, and a man sleeping in a chair at his bedside awakened.

Donovan wrinkled his nose. Pungent aromas teased his nostrils. "What the devil is that smell?"

The man rose from his chair and leaned over the bed. "Poultices made from medicinal herbs," he answered, then poked his fingers about Donovan's shoulders.

He felt as if the man was literally under his skin.

"I am."

Shock washed over Donovan's senses. The mage was vampire and obviously capable of reading his mind.

"What are you doing to me?"

"Removing medicinal packs placed inside your larger wounds. They need changing."

Donovan raised his hand to the mage's arm, his fingers circling around the bony wrist. "Leave me be."

"They must be removed."

He rolled his eyes. "Then remove them and be done with it. I need no more care."

The mage nodded.

"Where is my granduncle?"

"In his chambers, still asleep I would imagine."

Donovan didn't think any vampire slept after dusk.

The mage laughed. "You don't know Vastos. He lives life by his own set of rules."

A rip sounded from his shoulder, and pain tore through his flesh. "Good gods, man. And you call yourself a mage?"

"'Tis only a thin layer of skin formed over the poultice, it will grow back and heal."

"I'd rather it festered. At least then I would know what to expect."

The mage removed the remaining herbal packs, tearing at Donovan's flesh only once more before finishing his work.

"I have found you a clean set of pants, a shirt and boots. I could rustle up nothing more without alerting too much suspicion."

The mage's words piqued Donovan's attention. "Suspicion as to what?"

"Your uncle gave strict orders that not a hair on your head was to be disturbed." The mage raked a cold stare over Donovan's body. "I fear his instructions were not well adhered to."

"Why such concern from Vastos?"

"He did not say."

Donovan watched the mage with caution. He followed the man's gaze as it fell to his neck, a slight burning sensation stirring his flesh. The mage's ability to probe a wound strictly with his vampyric sight astounded Donovan. "He needs me for something and it is based on that bloody bite, I am sure."

"You have lost a lot of blood."

"Thank Vastos for that."

The mage backed away. "The dark lord bit you?"

"Does the notion frighten you? With your medicinal training, I would have thought you would be able to sense who bit me."

"No. I can only see the severity of a wound, nothing more. I should have been told before being forced to work on your body." A gray pallor crossed the mage's already pale face.

Donovan had no idea why the man reacted as he did. "And if you knew, would you have attempted to save me from death or allowed me to wallow in pain?"

"For the sake of my Queen and her realm, I would have chosen the latter."

Confusion and puzzlement rattled his brain. Vastos was the key to his misery, and he needed to find an antidote. If a

mage, a man skilled in the workings of medicine feared his disease, then surely no one but the dark lord could indeed help him. The bite connected him to hell on levels Donovan was sure were grave.

He tried a second time to sit up. He struggled, but he finally achieved a bit of success. Sitting crookedly upon the bed, he edged his weary bones to the far side of the mattress and slowly slid his feet to the floor. Every inch of his body ached.

"Here are the clothes and boots," the mage said, handing over the clean, crisp articles of clothing.

Donovan dressed on his own, refusing the mage's help, despite his sore limbs. Placing his feet inside the pair of boots proved the worst of his agonies. The pain that wracked his muscles as he raised his legs and bent forward to reach his feet was excruciating. He took a deep breath when he finished and waited a moment before attempting to rise from the bed. "Take me to Vastos."

The mage shook his head. "Not until the dark lord calls for you."

"Fine, then I will find him myself." He gritted his teeth and pushed himself up from the bed, his every step hampered by stiff joints and weak bones. It felt as if the pain of a thousand stakes pierced his heart.

Donovan counted each step taken toward the door. At least he was headed in the right direction.

"You will find Vastos's chambers at the far end of the hall. The open door leads to a hidden corridor and a short flight of

steps. Vastos lives in a set of rooms off to the right of the top landing."

Donovan glanced over his shoulder. A searing pain ripped through his veins at the movement. "Are there more guards?"

"No," the mage answered. "They have been instructed to remain outside the building and to return only to watch over the children."

Donovan reached for the door latch and pushed the pad of his thumb down on the iron lever, opening the door.

Stepping out into the hallway, he heard children's voices. He wondered what fate had befallen Icení and Conor's son. By now, he was sure the guards had to know the boy was missing. He stopped in the middle of the corridor, indecision racking his brain. He considered asking the mage if Icení had been captured, but he decided against it. If the Cení princess had escaped, she certainly didn't need Upyrans on her trail. He'd have to wait until after he'd dealt with Vastos to inquire about her situation. The idea didn't sit well with him.

Donovan inched his way down the hall, every step forward, more painful than the last. At the end of the corridor he found the door leading to Vastos's private apartments.

He tugged at the handle, and the large wooden portal opened with ease. An unlocked door wasn't what he expected to find.

A searing jab struck his neck, and the bite began to bleed again. Ignoring the wound, Donovan stepped into the darkened passageway leading to Vastos's rooms and made his way through the windy stone hall. Old windows, boarded

up with wooden panels, sat carved into the walls, the only light coming in was from small holes dotting the ceiling.

Donovan arrived at the last door and reached for the crystal knob. The round handle turned to silver on the instant, burning his palm and fingers, and he jerked his hand away.

The door opened on its own accord. Creaking sounds echoed through the heavy air, screeching at his ears.

Vastos was a bastard, Donovan mused. The man apparently had no desire to rest until he had completely broken his enemy and then some. The ancient vampire, however, had no idea how much fight Donovan had left in his soul.

He stepped across the threshold and entered a large chamber. A large mahogany desk sat in the middle of the room, and a four-poster bed draped in silks and velvets sat nearby. Nothing seemed out of place, everything in its rightful station, neat as a pin. Donovan noted the structured tidiness in which Vastos lived. The painstakingly ordered room was a complete opposite to the chaos the dark lord ruled over. The odd difference struck a chord with Donovan. Vastos obviously craved that which he did not have.

The bite at Donovan's neck bled more profusely, and he sucked in a mouthful of air. The essence of life suddenly slipped away from him. His knees buckled, and his hands trembled.

"Enough," a dark, familiar voice called.

On the instant, the bleeding stopped.

"Ah ... apparently the gods do still listen to me."

Donovan fell to his knees. "You are a bastard, Vastos."

The dark lord joined him upon the tiled floor. "Then we are two of the same kind. For every pain I have caused you, you have in turn, reflected back upon me."

"Nonsense. I have done nothing, least of all inflict pain on you. Until now, perhaps."

Vastos curved his lips. "Did you come here to fight until the death, nephew? How gallant of you. But may I remind you, should you die, then so shall the vampires of the Protectorate. And as for the human members of the organization ... Well, without an Itycan heir, the Upyrans will usurp the throne. And we all know what that will mean for mankind. An endless legion of dark Dead Walkers for generations to come. So, tell me the true reason for your visit."

Donovan stared his nemesis in the eyes, meeting the vampire's evil glare head on. "I came to take back the Ceni relic you stole during the Roman invasion."

Vastos rose to his feet, sauntered across the room, and began pacing in front of a pair of shuttered windows, his long black hair flowing like a lion's mane over his shoulders.

Donovan gathered his strength and pulled himself into a standing position.

"The bite has connected us more than I ever imagined, nephew."

Donovan said nothing, only grunted at the disgusting notion.

Vastos stopped in mid-stride and pushed open the thick shutters sealing the room's windows. "I find your reasoning to disrupt my world quite ironic," he said. "For if truth be told, I

have allowed you and that whore of a princess you have bedded entrance to my estate precisely because of the Ceni relic."

Donovan pinched the bridge of his nose. The swarming of hidden thoughts and sudden realizations overwhelmed his mind. "Iceni has only one third of the Ceni powers, you have the other third. What good would her relic do you?"

Vastos leaned back against the window frame, his broad shoulders and tall height blocking most of the incoming breeze. "I have reason to believe the missing part of the relic is within my grasp. There are several dealers who sell antiquities and my men have already made inquiries. Before I leave here, I will have the whole of the Ceni powers. Iceni's is the only part I now need."

Donovan laughed. "I fear, my lord, you have been wronged by your very own men."

Vastos's dark brows arched in question.

"That's right," Donovan said. "No man on this earth has what you are looking for because I am the sole holder of the missing part of the Ceni relic."

Anger glossed over Vastos's face. The vampire's eyes grew dark, fathomless. "Impossible."

Donovan shook his head. "You should have done more than merely bite me all those years ago. For if you had, you would have found a small charm carried under my wrist, tucked away beneath the leather straps that held my dagger."

Vastos clenched his fists. He raised his head to the heavens and roared like a lion. Then he turned back to face

Donovan. "You have no right to do this to me. To destroy me."

"Why the urgent need for the relic?"

Vastos spun on his heel, turning his back to Donovan. "The relic is the only antidote to our common affliction. Unite the three pieces and restore the charm's Upyran powers."

"Or have Icení unite the pieces and restore the relic's Cení powers."

Vastos jerked his head around. "Are you mad? I would never allow such action to take place. It would secure my death on the instant."

Donovan lunged for Vastos. With an angered temper flaring in his soul, he grabbed hold of the vampire's impeccably knotted neck cloth and pulled him forward. "Give me the relic or die by blood letting."

"If I die, and if the Cení relic is united by that whore of yours, you die as well. We are connected now, you and me."

Donovan wanted to lash out at Vastos, but doing so would do him little good. He couldn't allow himself to die, leaving Icení and Conor's son alone in Upyran territory. The Protectorate would be destroyed with no hope of resurrection. Icení could bring them powers in his stead. If both he and Icení died, the Upyrans would rule supreme. He backed down and released his tight grasp on his uncle's neck cloth. Then he tossed back his head and howled in frustration.

"I'm curious," Vastos said. "Why would you give all for a woman who loves another?"

The dark lord's words shattered Donovan's senses. He turned to face Vastos, confusion flooding his mind.

"Ah, but you had no idea, did you?" Vastos waved his fingers in a gesture for Donovan to approach. "Come, look out on the lawns beneath us and see your woman in the arms of another."

Donovan stomped across the room, pain mixed with anger rising in his soul. He leaned out the arched window and glared down below. The scene before his eyes was most disheartening, for in the middle of the vast lawns of the dark lord's estate stood Icení, wrapped in the arms of another man. The aura of Upyran vampire resonated from the man's body, sending the slice of a razor-sharp knife straight through the core of Donovan's heart. The Upyran guard even kissed Icení, while embracing her with a strong hold. Donovan backed away from the window. He had no need to see more.

"Change your mind, now nephew?"

He'd given the woman his word. "No. I came for the relic and I will leave with the relic," he said, moving across the room and away from Vastos and the window.

"And endanger the Protectorate?"

He was trapped.

Vastos's thin lips curved in a half smile. "There is one other way."

Donovan refused to hear the vampire's words. "Why did you bite me in the first place? What did I offer you that you already did not have?"

"Life—mortal life." Vastos left the window and crossed the room to face him. He grabbed Donovan by the arm and rolled up his sleeve, exposing his wrist. A small tick jumped beneath his skin. "Can you feel that?"

"My pulse?"

"Yes, Donovan, your pulse, your mortal pulse. Do you know how long I have craved to feel a true pulse? True emotions? Anything—joy, pain, sometimes even death. The quasi existence was taken from me when I was but a babe. My mother gave birth to two children, twin boys, one alive, one stillborn."

"But you live now."

"If my existence is what you can truly call living, then you have no appreciation for life. In her anger, my mother defied the gods and breathed life back into my soul. I aged like a quasi until my thirtieth year. But never once did I feel any emotions. Until I found you."

Donovan reached a slow hand to his neck. The pad of his finger skimmed over the protruding double wounds. A pain seared his flesh. He and Vastos were indeed connected through the bite, which would explain the sudden attacks on his flesh and the recent bleeding bite marks.

Vastos doubled over. "Do you see ... how ... we are ... connected?"

Donovan dropped his hand to his side.

Vastos took a deep breath and straightened. "Every time your Itycan flesh touches the wound I inflicted, my soul burns. Every time I pain, you pain. Every time you love, I love." He paused. A sly grin lifted Vastos's lips. "Oh, yes, Donovan. I have been there with every whore you have enjoyed. Even your sweet Icenì."

"You bastard." Donovan raised a fist and aimed for Vastos's chin. He wanted nothing more than to beat the

vampire to a bloody pulp, as the bastard had done to his father so many years before.

The dark lord gripped his balled hand on the instant. "If not the relic, then there is only one other way to ease the pain."

Donovan flared his nostrils in anger. "Tell me. I'll do anything to sever your soul from mine."

"Oh, nephew if only it were as easy."

"What do you mean?"

Vastos eyed Donovan's bare wrist. His long, pointed fangs descended past his lips, their tips biting into his own flesh. "The alternate antidote will not free you from me, but will temporarily calm the clashing blood flowing through our veins. Allow me to finish the bite, take more of you, while sharing more with you. The pain will cease, but the infliction will stay for all time, linking us together forever."

He had little choice in the matter. Icení, Samuel and the Protectorate meant more to him than anything else. The sacrifice of his own blood for theirs was one he was willing to make. "Then so be it. I will agree, if you give me your third of the relic and allow me to take both Icení and the child she has in her care back to Bramwell Abbey."

Vastos hissed.

"I will have it no other way." He waited in silence, glaring at the dark lord.

Vastos narrowed his eyes. The small, beady portals flared with a reddish glow. "The relic will free you from me," the dark lord said. "Why not take that route instead?"

"No," Donovan said. "Take my blood for Icení and the boy." He refused to give in at this point. Vastos needed him, and he would force the vampire into a sacred bargain.

"You make a great sacrifice, nephew."

He didn't answer. No sacrifice was too great for another's life.

Vastos pulled his arm closer to his mouth. The tips of his fangs grazed Donovan's flesh. Pain ripped through his body like a great inferno, searing his blood and gnawing at his soul.

Vastos bit down harder, his fangs fully implanted within Donovan's veins. He felt as if he had been to hell and back, and if his life was literally being sucked out of him. His every emotion, his every memory, the things that made his soul unique to him, were now being shared with the greatest of his enemies. Donovan sucked in a deep breath, the need to breathe again great.

Vastos pulled away, lapping his tongue over his lips and retracting fangs. Then, suddenly, he doubled over and purged the blood he had just taken in.

Donovan stood back in horror, never having witnessed such a reaction before.

Vastos reached up a shaking hand, pleading for Donovan to help him. "It is ... the geis ... an ancient Celtic rule placed upon my soul."

He knew full well a geis was an ancient law drawn up by the old druids that forbade a person from doing any number of specific actions. But it had been centuries since he had heard anyone refer to the strict code of rules. "What did the gods forbid you to do?"

Vastos looked up at him, his eyes rolling back in his head.
"Bite you..."

Donovan looked in awe at the struggling vampire quivering at his feet. He hated the man, but he was also his blood—his family. And he had not come here with the intent to kill Vastos, merely to take back that which did not belong to him. "Then, in the name of the gods, I free you from this geis, so long as you never attempt to break the ancient rule again."

Thunder cracked in the night sky, and Vastos's body calmed, his trembling limbs easing in their shaking.

Donovan wrapped his arms around the dark lord's waist and helped him to his feet. He hoisted the limp vampire over his shoulder and crossed the room, bringing Vastos to his bed.

"Where is the relic?"

Vastos lifted his right hand and uttered several words in ancient Gaelic. From out of nowhere, a gold charm appeared in his palm. He offered the relic to Donovan but turned his head in the opposite direction, as if he had been shamed and defeated.

Donovan snatched the relic from Vastos's hand, fearing the dark lord might change his mind if he had time to think over his situation.

"Go now," Vastos ordered.

"No. Not yet, uncle. I need to know how long I have before my tainted blood boils and I turn against the Protectorate."

Vastos rolled his head to one side. "How can you wish me to state my own shame? My own mistake? Are you not satisfied with the relic, the boy, and being the one creature

now capable of destroying me and my realm, when the gods so deem it?"

Donovan stared at him in confusion.

"Tell me you don't know of the prophecies?"

"I have no heir," Donovan said. "Only a soul born of both Upyran and Itycan blood can be hailed the Vampyric savior. And considering Icení, the last quasi allied to the Upyran bloodline, loves another, that feat will now never be accomplished."

"You need no heir, Donovan. My blood is Upyran. Yours is Itycan. Angus and I were twins, but because of my mother's sin in giving me back life, my brother's blood and my own were separated. According to the gods, where Vampyric power was concerned, Angus hailed only from my father's blood, and I only from my mother's. The feud between our parents split the kingdoms for all time. But now you are born of both bloods because of my bite."

The revelation shocked Donovan.

Before he could speak, Vastos said, "The boiling of your blood is merely the mixing of both sides. I had hoped to draw out the blood I gave you in the first bite. But I learned tonight that my actions can never be reversed. Nor could I have taken in enough of your blood to make my soul born of both worlds. It only works one way."

Donovan didn't know what to say, what to do. For the first time in centuries, he longed for the company of the Protectorate, of the council and the comforts of Bramwell Abbey.

"Now please," Vastos said in a hushed voice. "Go and leave me in my misery. Our war is far from over, and I still have a small amount of your blood flowing through my veins. Of the long term complications I know nothing."

The news he and Vastos would be forever linked stirred Donovan's soul. And if what his uncle said earlier, about them sharing certain emotions, the ancient vampire would continue to feel through him, live through him, even if only in the faintest of ways.

Donovan stepped away from the dark lord's bed, turned on his heel, and headed for the door. He never looked back.

Chapter Twenty-three

Limping down the front steps of the manor, Donovan saw Icení standing at the gatehouse. His body still ached from the numerous wounds he had received in Vastos's care, but his soul was too angry to concern itself with the physical side of his pain at the moment. He stepped off the last stair and stopped to pop his knee joint back into place. He sucked in a deep gasp of air, ignoring the bolt of fire that zapped his bones.

Icení emerged from the towerlike structure and ran to him. "In the name of the gods, what did Vastos do to you?"

"Now is not the time to discuss the matter. Where is Conor's boy?"

"In good hands, I assure you."

Icení placed her arm under Donovan's in an apparent show of support, but he had no need for such pretensions. The woman had already done enough damage to his heart. He didn't need her to push the agony any further. Donovan brushed Icení away.

"We must get the child and leave before Vastos calls out his guards. I do not trust him. He is liable to change his mind on a whim, depending upon what suits him at the moment. And I won't take any more chances."

Icení said nothing. She ran back to the gatehouse, slipped inside and then emerged with the head guard holding Conor's son.

Anger twisted in Donovan's heart. He limped toward Icení. The trek from Vastos's living quarters down to the front lawns further injured his joints. "Go to the horses, Icení," Donovan said through gritted teeth.

He eyed the Upyran vampire standing in front of him and shot him a seething glare. "Give me the child" He didn't wait for the man to hand over the boy, but reached for the tot and pulled him from the vampire's grasp.

"Do not forget this," the guard said, handing Donovan the stuffed bear. "'Tis the babe's favorite."

"Parthalán," Icení said. "Will you not reconsider and come with us?"

"Are you mad, woman? I will take no enemy to the Protectorate, least of all this soul." Donovan nudged his chin in Parthalán's direction.

Icení gave him a chilling stare. "My lord, how can you be so cold?"

"I came for the boy and for the relic," Donovan said as he handed her the Cení charm. "Nothing more." He bit his bottom lip, and in pain, spun around heading for the dirt path. He had upheld his end of the bargain, and that released him from any further duties owed Icení.

As he set foot on the path, his horses came galloping from within the forest. Donovan waited for Icení, who still lingered in the arms of Vastos's head guard. The sight sickened him. How the woman could so openly, so blatantly, display her affection for the cursed Upyran, he would never understand.

He adjusted the saddles on the horses with one hand, the other wrapped tightly about Conor's son.

"You make a poor king, Bramwell. I thank the gods the council oversees all areas of diplomacy. For you, my lord, would cause a war more retched than did Boney," Icení said when she joined him.

Donovan fumed. The woman had sheer nerve. "Why are you still here? I told you the horses would come for you because of the child." He waited by Icení's side, seeing her safely upon the mare.

"Dawn came. I could not cross the lawn in full sun. Had it been the usual rainy day, I'd have made my way back to Bramwell Abbey, but fate had other plans, I suppose," She replied as she mounted her horse.

He mounted his horse and secured the child in front of him. Kicking his boot heel against the stallion's side, Donovan took off in a heated huff, with Icení riding a close distance behind him. The ride back to Bramwell Abbey would be anything but pleasant, he surmised. His only saving grace was his knowing that Conor's son had been found. The rest meant nothing to him.

* * * *

Vastos remained in his bed, his heart feeling a pain never before experienced.

"My lord," his mage said. "Mayhap a bit of laudanum would do you some good?"

"Leave me be," Vastos growled. He cared for nothing right now, not even for his remaining wife, Ophelia. He wondered, since she had once been mortal, did she share his pain, his loss at the deaths of Isabella and Pandora? The thought that

he was concerned for another's feeling irked him. He preferred caring for no one. "I have more on my mind than your bloody antidotes." He paused. The dull ache of the great loss twisted in his heart. He felt the Protectorate coming closer. "Donovan will send his men to take the children away from here. His Dead Walkers will defeat mine."

"Have no fear, my lord. Your future slaves will be secure, I assure you."

"You and that bloody guard couldn't keep my nephew from being harmed, or my wives from being killed. You expect me to believe you can protect all my captives?"

The mage held his tongue.

"Besides, I have no desire to further the population of Upyra. I took the children merely to spare them from starvation."

The mage offered him a puzzled stare. "Then what were you going to do with them?"

"Educate them and send them back into their world to renew it. But I no longer have the same desires as before. The Protectorate can have the children, every last one of them." He turned to face the mage, a stern warning crossing his face. "Not a drop of Upyran blood is to be spilled. Is that clear? I want my men to pull out before Donovan's warriors arrive. Leave only the children."

"But my lord, you have done so much for the children, invested so heavily in them."

"My only concern now is for the throne that my brother stole from me. There must be a way to overthrow the Protectorate. Somehow, I will find it, and when I do, I intend

to unleash my full wrath upon the world." The notion of finally achieving victory over his brother Angus pleased him. He hated the fact Angus was born the good son, the soul that hailed from the light, while his pitiful existence was seen as nothing more than that of a tarnished soul. He was stillborn and his mother cursed the gods and gave him back life. It was not his fault he'd been born a dark spirit. One day, Vastos thought, the gods will pay for the suffering he'd endured.

The notion gave him a bit of satisfaction. The pain in his body faded, leaving nothing more than a faint trace of emotions locked away within the deepest depths of his soul.

Chapter Twenty-four

In all his life, Donovan had never been happier to see Bramwell Abbey. The sight of the large, ancient manor brought back sentimental feelings he'd long since forgotten, memories of days before the Roman invasion. He suddenly felt as if he was home. He dismounted his horse, and with Samuel still wrapped in his arms, he headed inside the abbey.

A maid greeted him at the stairs.

"See to the princess Icen's needs," he said, and then headed down the main corridor toward the nursery.

"Bram!" Conor shouted as he emerged from the nursery rooms. He dashed down the hall, heading straight for Donovan, his boots skidding on the tile. "I started to think you would never return."

"I did not expect to find you here, Conor."

"Simpson brought me. He suggested I wait here for Samuel's return."

Donovan handed the boy over to Conor. The tot was laughing and holding on to his stuffed bear. The look in Conor's eyes was one of joy mixed with sadness.

"My God," Conor cried. "I cannot believe you have actually found him. He looks just like Siobhan." He kissed the tot's forehead and held him close. "He has her smile." He then bounced the boy in his arms and held him up. "I can never thank you enough, Donovan. Ever."

Calm settled in Donovan's soul, but not in his heart. "If you need protection from your father, I can arrange passage to New York as you had earlier talked about."

Conor shook his head. "Thank you, but that is no longer necessary."

Donovan cocked his head and eyed his friend curiously. "Have you and his lordship come to an agreement?"

A blank look settled across Conor's face. "My father died in his sleep the night I came to Dun Sidhe."

"I am sorry, Conor. I did not know."

"'Tis all right, Bram. No true love lost there."

"What of your brother?"

Conor smiled at Samuel, and then turned back to Donovan. "I have yet to talk with him. I plan to go to my father's estate tonight and tell my brother everything. About Siobhan and Samuel, about my fortune, and about our father selling my son."

Donovan imagined such a discussion would not be an easy one. He felt for Conor. "Tell me, have you seen Brooks lately?"

Conor raised an eyebrow. "No. Why would I?"

Donovan shook his head. "Just curious, nothing more."

"He is the last person I would ever care to associate with outside that dratted club. Which, by the way, I have no intentions of going to any time soon, now that I have Samuel back." Conor focused his attention back on the tot in his arms. A tear ran down cheek, and he rubbed his face with the back of his hand. "I cannot believe I finally have my son back. I owe you my life, Donovan."

"Do not get soft on me, Conor. Keep your strength, because one day I may ask you to repay me and you won't be able to refuse." He smiled at his friend. "I need to tend to official business. See me when you have the chance. Dun Sidhe is always open to you, especially now that your father has passed on. Come stay with me until things have settled. It will probably be best for Samuel."

Conor nodded. "Thank you. After I speak with my brother, I will take you up on your generous offer."

"Good. I will tell Simpson to hire a nanny and have the nursery refurbished at the castle."

"Will that be too much for him?"

Donovan grinned. "Simpson lives for moments like these. You should see how he has taken some of my newer help under his wing. Give the man a good excuse to help others and I guarantee you won't find a truer friend. I believe it stems from his being abandoned by his own tribe when he was quite young."

A look of shock crossed Conor's face. "Vampires abandon their young?"

"He was a child too small to keep up with the pack, so he was abandoned. The Protectorate found him and rescued him. He's been with us ever since."

Samuel hiccupped, and a bit of baby drool fell from his cherubic lips.

"Oh, Sammy, I do believe I am going to have my hands full with you. Are you aware your daddy has no idea what to do with you?" Conor's voice trailed off as he left the room to go find a nanny and a cloth for the babe's mouth.

Donovan took a deep breath and glanced around the nursery. The bright colors seemed so cheerful. He wished his own heart could express the same feelings. But alas, he was empty inside. Conor had his son, Icení had her relic, and the Protectorate had yet another victory against Vastos. And he was alone once more.

He raked a hand through his hair and made his way out of the nursery. He needed to go back to Dun Sidhe as soon as possible. In the catacombs he would find his peace.

Luther stopped him in the hall. Donovan eyed the small trunk tucked under his friend's arm. "Going somewhere?"

"Magnus has sentenced me to Prussia. Apparently there is some sort of vampyric interest in the area."

"Now, why would dear, sweet Magnus do such a thing? He knows how you hate going back to that place."

Luther hesitated. "I had no choice, Donovan."

"In what?"

Luther put down the trunk he carried and sat on it. "He wanted to send a troop of warriors to Vastos's estate. I knew from the first time you spoke about the task that you had a personal situation with the dark lord. And heaven forgive me, I knew I could not allow Magnus to interfere in the matter."

"So what did you do?"

Luther raised his head and looked away. "I take it you have not yet seen Magnus?"

Donovan shook his head.

"The man left me choice. I cupped him in the jaw. He now bears a great bruise near his chin."

Donovan let out a laugh.

"I do not see the matter at all funny. The man will never let me forget this. He will be forever sentencing me to the far ends of the Earth, off on some remote mission in which we probably have no real concern."

"Better you than me, Luther."

The man rolled his eyes and frowned. He rose to his feet and retrieved the box from the floor. "One of these days, Donovan, I won't be around to clean up your mess, or to keep Magnus from sticking his nose where it does not belong."

Donovan patted him on the shoulder. "If you need me to interfere on your behalf, I would do so willingly."

Luther shook his head. "No, better to get this over with. If I do not go now, the man will only find some other pointless task for me. And the gods only know what that would be."

"Take care, my friend."

Luther gave him a sly grin. "I always do. If I did not, there would be no one here to save your bloody soul."

Donovan nodded and watched in silence as Luther made his way out of the building. He thanked the gods he had not yet encountered Magnus.

* * * *

Iceni changed her clothes, thankful for the dresses Simpson had sent over to the abbey. She wondered what would happen to her now. Where fate would take her. What the gods would say about her actions against Vastos's wives. So many thoughts swarmed through her mind. Donovan had his Protectorate duties and the woman the gods had deemed

to be his bride, whoever she might be, and Conor had his son back.

She sighed and ventured across the room to the floor length mirror. Her faint image appeared in the glass as she spun around. She now had two thirds of the Ceni relic. Removing her necklace, Icení held one end in her hand and slipped on the second part of the charm. The two fragments merged on the instant, bonding into a single piece of gold.

A tear ran down her face. She remembered her father wearing the one piece, and her mother wearing the second. History might be a sore subject with her, but at the moment, she wished for nothing more than to be able to take back the past. To once more capture what she had in days gone by. But she knew the task was impossible, even for a quasi-vampire.

Her heart ached. She wished she could find someone with whom to have the same loving relationship her parents had shared. Mayhap one day her vampire prince would come, or at least she could dream he would. The future, for her as she saw it at present, was uncertain, but at least she'd been successful in finding the second part of the Ceni relic. Rather, Donovan had been successful for her.

Thoughts of the handsome yet fierce Lord Protector came flooding back to her. She had no idea why Donovan had turned so cold toward her all of a sudden. And she imagined, at this point, she would never learn the reason.

Chapter Twenty-five

Donovan leaned back in his chair, his arms folded behind his head. In some distant part of his brain, Magnus McKei's droning voice lingered on in an endless wave of murmured words. But despite the man's persistent chatter, Donovan's thoughts focused on other matters.

He had just rescued a mortal child from the clutches of evil, finally lived up to his father's belief in him, and officially accepted his birthright as the Protectorate's Lord Protector. Yet somewhere deep within the most private hollows of his heart, Donovan felt a gaping void, a wide hole none of his heroic feats could satisfy.

The loud slamming of a mallet crashing down against the table jolted him back to reality.

"My lord, please," Magnus, begged. "Have you no comment on any of these matters?"

Donovan straightened in his chair. "Forgive me. I am afraid my brain is of little use to all of you today." He rose to his feet and walked the length of the room, stopping next to Magnus's chair. "Is that a bruise upon your chin?" He couldn't resist the temptation.

Magnus offered him a glare. "I have no desire to discuss the matter at present. The Protectorate is far more important."

Donovan gave him a nod. "Very well. As for the matters at hand, do as you see fit."

"But Donovan!"

The other council members present gasped.

Donovan laughed to himself. He didn't believe the staunch Protectorate leaders had ever heard a member address their king by his given name. "Very well, what was it that you were saying?"

"The children have all been rescued," Magnus said. "We are making every effort to return them to their families. In situations where that is not possible, thanks to Vastos having turned their parents to the Vampyric lifestyle or worse, the children will be placed with mortal families allied to the Protectorate. The list of members willing to adopt the children is great."

"Then the Protectorate has done its job." He turned toward the door.

"There is more, sir."

He relented. If he did not settle the situation with Magnus now, the man would only persist in his annoying ways. He spun around and gave the council his full attention.

"No Protectorate blood was spilled in the attack," Magnus said. "Nor was any Upyran. Vastos vacated the area prior to our arrival."

"He waits," Donovan commented, raking a hand through his hair. "And so must we."

Magnus shot him a bewildered stare. "But what if he is already prepared to attack right now? Where will such an event take place? Does he have Upyran vampires living in disguise, mulling about in mortal communities? We do not know where he has gone or what he will do next. And what about his legions of Dead Walkers?"

Donovan glanced at each council member, and then looked back to Magnus. "We have encountered the dark lord and his armies for thousands of years. We fought them when they befriended the Romans. We met them in the Viking raids. We challenged them when they infiltrated the Greeks, the Etruscans, and the list is endless. So shall it continue to grow. Man has faced war and evil temptation since the beginning of time, and still we survive. It's the vicious cycle of life, Magnus. We can't do anything to change that except do what we believe to be right and to do our best when the time comes."

Magnus fell back in his chair and huffed. "There is still the matter of the Protectorate heir and the ancient prophecies. Even Vastos is aware of the soul who now carries both Itycan and Upyran blood in his veins. Have you nothing to say of this grave concern?"

Donovan hesitated. Telling all would also mean alerting the council to the possibility of an eventual all out war with the Upyrans. But his people needed to know the truth. "We misinterpreted the prophecies. The soul who can unite and destroy the vampire kingdoms will not be the child I sire."

Magnus looked up at him, a veil of great concern masking his face. "Then the rumors are true? Another being exists who carries this mixed blood?"

Donovan nodded.

"My gods, what will we do? If he is not Itycan and not Upyran, then surely we face an unknown enemy."

Donovan smiled. The man had a knack for taking a simple situation and adding far too much drama to the matter. "Fear

not, my dear Magnus. The soul the ancients had prophesied about is indeed Itycan. In fact, he is a member of our very own Protectorate."

Magnus scrunched his forehead. "I don't understand, my lord. If I did not know better, I would think you spoke of yourself in such terms."

Donovan said nothing, only offered a silent, compelling stare.

Magnus looked away, drummed his fingers against the table, and then looked back at Donovan. "In the name of the gods, you are the one, aren't you?"

"Let me just say that when Vastos attempted to rid this Earth of my existence, he created the one creature that could either unite or destroy us all. And from this point on, I have no desire to talk of the matter again. Now, if the council will see fit to excuse me, I have several personal issues that must be dealt with."

He turned and exited the council chamber.

Iceni greeted him halfway down the corridor, and his heart skipped a beat. Seeing her in an elegant sheer gown made of gold threads and creamy white lace sent a base urge coursing through his body. He swore a silent oath to himself and looked up at the ceiling, averting his gaze away from her body. The thought of Iceni belonging to another man pained him more now than before.

"Donovan, where have you been?"

"Doing my job, your highness." He glanced at her, his willpower fading.

A look of hurt glossed her eyes. "Three days have passed since we returned and you haven't said more than a mere word to me."

"That, my lady, is because I have had nothing to discuss with you."

She glared at him. "Do you not even care to know how I managed to escape the Upyrans? You have asked me nothing of the matter."

He let out a deep breath, his senses reeling in anger mixed with hurt. "Tell me, then."

"Your damned pistols worked. I was attacked by three female vampires, all taken from the mortal realm, and all of them once part of the Ceni tribe."

He stared at her, his tongue at a loss for words.

"Vastos took the Ceni as his brides," she said.

Donovan raised an eyebrow. His uncle was more like his Itycan roots than the man could ever care to know. He laughed to himself, the notion striking an odd chord in his soul. "What do you wish me to say, Iceni? Thank you for enlightening me on the matter. I will make sure the Protectorate knows the stake pistols work. Anything more?"

She sent him a glare that could kill had she had the power to do so. The matter perplexed him. He had done nothing but risk his own life for her, and she'd betrayed him, not the other way around. "There is still one piece missing from the Ceni relic."

"You will have your powers back by dawn."

Donovan pushed past her. He had no time for a woman who would lie and cheat only to get what she wanted. He was

better off alone, unattached. But that didn't stop the pain in his heart's gaping hole from returning. He cursed to himself. A fine brandy would do him good just about now, and he knew exactly where to go to get one. But first he needed to retrieve Icení's relic from the catacombs at Dun Sidhe. The quicker he was rid of Icení, the better off he would be.

A thud echoed in the hall as the far door closed behind Donovan, and Icení jumped at the sound. Her senses had been on end these last few days. Even her hours of sleep had been restless, at best. She wondered if her world would ever return to normal.

Simpson appeared at her side, and with a gasp, Icení placed a hand over her heart.

"Did I startle you, your highness?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I am just a bit put out, sir. Nothing more."

"Donovan has a way of doing that to people he cares about."

"An odd creature, to say the least," she commented.

"True, but only when he believes that it is his soul that has been betrayed."

"Whatever do you mean?"

Simpson scanned the corridor, as if making sure they were alone. "I can say no more at the moment. I will send the phaeton around for you at dusk. I would prefer the carriage, but I fear my master has already commissioned its use tonight. At Dun Sidhe, I will tell all."

The vampire valet disappeared into the shadows.

Iceni wondered what the man had up his sleeve. He knew Donovan all too well, and that knowledge alone piqued her interest. Mayhap a visit with Simpson would prove a good thing.

Chapter Twenty-six

The catacombs seemed suddenly cold to Donovan, colder than usual. The place, where for almost two thousand years he had come to find comfort from life's endless hurdles, now did little to help ease his mixed emotions. He stared down into the darkened sarcophagus, the secret compartment open and displaying the treasure he'd come to retrieve. Somehow he didn't want it to end. The longer he held on to the Ceni relic, the longer he had Iceni. Yet the pain she had caused him was great. He stepped away from the tomb and slid down to the floor, his back leaning against the cool marble.

His father would have been proud of him for finally saving the girl. If only the man would have warned him about the wounds of love lost. Ironical, Donovan thought. The one woman the gods had chosen for him, the one woman for whom he had searched thousands of years, the only woman he ever truly loved, loved another soul.

A faint shadow crossed the torch lit walls, and Donovan reached for the small dagger he kept hidden beneath his shirt cuff. His fingers pulled the ivory handle forward, sliding it against his palm. How an intruder had managed to invade the catacombs, he would never know. Not even Simpson knew his way around the sacred floors beneath Dun Sidhe.

The shadow took on the faint form of a man, and then it materialized into a being with real substance. Donovan recognized the familiar soul on the instant, the realization jarring his thoughts.

"Angus?" The sight of his grandfather standing before him surprised Donovan. The man had been turned only recently, and according to the laws of the ancient Celtic gods, Angus's soul should still be making the transition between Lord Protector and full-fledged vampire, not making the rounds of his old homes.

"Yes, Donovan, 'tis I."

He rose to his feet. "But so soon? I hadn't expected us to cross paths again for some time."

Angus smiled at him. "I learned a thing or two in my day, Donovan. One was that not all laws in the ancient prophecies were written by the gods. Some were merely inserted by Protectorate elders to keep peace among the vampires. Good rules, but not necessarily the words of our gods."

"But you have been turned, no?"

Angus nodded.

His grandfather looked the same, Donovan thought. Just as he had always known him to be—white hair, a full face, tall stature, and a suit of formal clothes. The man simply never changed his old ways. "Who did this to you? It was my belief that only Vastos or I were strong enough in Vampyric powers to turn a Lord Protector. Other than the two of us, you would have had to be turned by a whole flock of vampires."

Angus walked over to the sarcophagus in the center of the chamber. "Have you kept him here all these years?"

"Yes." Donovan felt a pang of guilt twinge his soul. "I had no right to keep such information from you. He was your son. But from the time of his death, I believed you had abandoned

him. He died on the battlefield near East Angliae, after having been brutally beaten, bitten and then left to bleed to death."

"The infamous Upyran double bite."

"Yes," Donovan said.

"And what do you think now? Do you still believe I abandoned my only son?"

"In truth, I know not what to believe, except that my heart has come to terms with the fact that not all that is seen is what it appears to be."

"I never abandoned my son or you, for that matter. I was there, just over the hillside, when I began my trek down to the battlefield. You had just been confronted by my brother, Vastos." Angus placed his hands on top of the open tomb, a look of great sadness touching his face. "One of the ancient gods appeared before me and stopped me from coming to your aid. He said you were the chosen one, the soul who would be born of both bloods, Itycan and Upyran, and if I attempted to rescue you from the battlefield at that moment, I would be denying you your rightful destiny. I never felt so much pain in all my existence. But I had to let you endure the bite my brother was about to inflict upon your neck in order for you to be the true savior of our people."

Donovan said nothing; he couldn't. His soul had been pummeled by an onslaught of emotions too heavy to sort out. He tossed back his head and let out a deep breath.

"The ancient Celtic vampire gods turned me, Donovan. I conferred with them after learning of your recent return to Eire. We thought it best." Angus faced him, a carefree smile edging his lips. "Besides, after reigning for several thousand

years, I felt I had earned my rest. It was high time you took my place."

Donovan jerked his head to the side. "You did this for me? You gave up everything—your throne, your kingdom—for me?"

Angus offered a slight laugh. "For you and the lady Whelan. You're not the only Bramwell who fancies a pretty face, and after all the years you've had at fun, it is now time we reversed the roles. I still have a kick in my soul, Donovan." Angus nudged his side.

"At least one of us will have a bit of sport, grandfather."

"Have you not Icenî?"

Donovan shook his head. "She loves another soul. I saw it with my own eyes, and I have no intention of interfering, not after all the woman has been through. She finally has a chance to be happy, and I would never dream of taking that away from her. I have no right."

"I would think twice about the princess Icenî, Donovan. As you said before, not everything is as it seems."

Donovan reached into the sarcophagus and retrieved the last part to the Cenî relic. "I must return this before dawn." He eyed his grandfather, a child's longing nagging at his heart. This man was all the caring family he had left. Vastos and Upyra might be family, but they were his enemies.

"We will see each other again, Donovan," Angus said. "That I promise you."

"What will you do now? Life as a full-fledged vampire is surely different than that of a quasi."

"As former Lord Protector, I will lend my knowledge of past events to the Protectorate as an elite council member. The job will give me something to do and let me remain with the organization. An old king is hard to get rid of completely."

Donovan gave a soft chuckle.

Angus leaned in close to him. "Should you ever have need of me, merely call my name and I will appear."

Before Donovan could respond, Angus had disappeared back into the shadows.

Donovan pushed against the marble sarcophagus lid and closed his father's tomb. With torch in hand, he headed back upstairs.

Simpson waited at the library doors. The unexpected sight of his valet in the room startled Donovan. "Zounds, you scared me to hell, man. Why do you do that?"

"What? Appear when I am needed most and you desire my presence the least?"

Donovan rolled his eyes and frowned. "Yes, exactly."

"I don't know. Call it the gift of having a very precise mind. You know, my lord, not all servants are as in tune with their master as I am to you. I do say that is a great benefit for you."

"More like a major hindrance, Simpson. And while we're talking about servants, see to it that Roger learns to tie a proper knot in his neck cloth. The young pup was a muddled mess the last time I saw him."

"Of course, my lord."

Simpson didn't move from the door. Donovan knew the man was up to something. And knowing him as well as he

did, this latest scheme was probably something he would not approve of, no doubt.

After waiting for the bookcases to move back into their proper places, he crossed the carpet and headed toward the door. Still, Simpson did not budge.

"I am off to the club. To Temple Barr."

"Will you be spending the night at Henrietta Street, my lord?"

"Most likely."

"I presume you will fly, as opposed to taking the coach?"

Donovan nodded. "Why the concern, man? Have I ever revealed my true self in public before? I assure you, the Stags no longer know anything of the Bramwell soul." He hated being asked so many questions. Simpson knew better than to annoy him when he was in an already agitated state. The situation did not sit well with him. "Are you satisfied, man?"

"Of course, my lord. It is good to know Temple Barr no longer knows of the bat that dwells within your soul. I can rest easier now."

"Good. Then step aside lest I move you myself."

"You cannot let the woman simply walk away."

Donovan raised an eyebrow. "I see. So this is about Princess Icení." He let out a groan. Simpson interfered where he had no right.

"Has it not always been, my lord?"

Donovan's patience wore thin. He was tired of people dictating right from wrong to him. He just wanted to be left alone, to wallow in his sorrows and drown away the pain.

"You have a very serious problem following orders, Simpson. I hate it when you disobey me."

"I know only from the example set for me." He cocked his head to one side.

Donovan extended his hand. "See to it this gets to Bramwell Abbey, to Icení, before dawn."

"Why not take it yourself? I am sure the woman would much rather receive the relic from you than me."

He approached Simpson, his breath fanning the man's face. "First, you will now move out of my path. Second, you will take the bloody relic to the princess. If you fail to do either of the aforementioned, I will have your heart, your head and your soul."

Simpson gave a reluctant sigh. "You are a most stubborn man, my lord. Even if you are my king."

Donovan dropped the small sack containing the Cení relic into his valet's palm.

The annoyed vampire stepped to one side of the doors and allowed him to pass through.

Even as Donovan headed outside the castle, his ears still heard the aged valet's murmurs. And knowing Simpson as he did, he would probably continue to hear the man's wretched oaths all the way to Dublin and back.

* * * *

After Donovan left Dun Sidhe, Simpson scurried to the back door. Waiting in silence, he signaled for the driver to bring round the phaeton, praying to the gods Donovan didn't decide to return for some muddle-brained reason.

Iceni stepped down from the small carriage and approached him. "I cannot thank you enough, sir."

"Please," he said. "'Tis only part of my job." He winked at her.

The horses neighed as a stable hand gathered the reins and took over for Higgins.

Iceni ventured inside the townhouse and removed her cape. "I appreciate you taking me on like this and helping me in my cause. I am truly in the suds, and Donovan refuses to even say a word to me."

"Have no fear, your highness. I live for matchmaking."

She smiled a faint grin and prayed to the gods Simpson's plan would work. "What if Donovan does not agree with this?"

"Oh, my lady, I assure you his lordship will agree. He is merely being stubborn. How can one deny a fate deemed by the gods themselves? You are the soul the ancients handpicked for Donovan as his mate."

She sincerely hoped the vampire valet was correct. If not, Donovan would be lost to her forever.

"Before we start, your highness, I have something for you," Simpson said. He reached into the pocket of his black jacket and withdrew a small velvet pouch. "His lordship gave me strict orders that you were to receive this or my life would be over." He handed her the pouch.

Iceni took the small bag, her hand trembling. The moment her fingers touched the drawstring, she knew on the instant what was inside. "It is the relic," she said, opening the velvet pouch. Tears filled her eyes. "My peoples' deaths have been avenged, Simpson. After all these years, I finally have back

the Ceni powers." She removed the necklace from her neck and added the third charm. Like the first two had fused together, so did the third. The Ceni relic was now one piece, a whole made up of three fragments. Iceni reached her hands behind her neck and fastened the necklace. Her soul stirred and her body trembled from the mere thought of finally having back the sacred amulet. She closed her eyes and said a silent prayer to the gods and to her lost relatives. A sense of peace came over her. "Thank you Simpson," she said, opening her eyes.

"Thank Donovan, my lady. He has protected that relic with his very soul, his very life, since the Roman invasion. I believe he would have even died for your sake had that been the case."

She swallowed hard. Donovan had to know how much he meant to her. She'd find a way to get through to the irascible man if it was the last thing she ever did.

"Now," Simpson said, changing the subject. "First we must venture to Henrietta Street and engage young Roger. He will be our bait."

"Roger? The valet in training?"

Simpson rolled his eyes. "Yes, the valet in training. Unfortunately for us, the boy is loyal to a fault."

She let out a soft laugh, and a sense of excitement stirred her soul. "Tell me more, Simpson. I want to know every detail of your scheme." She patted a vacant seat on the kitchen bench, motioning for Simpson to sit down next to where she sat.

The elder vampire took his seat and began telling her the details of the plan he had earlier worked out with Magnus and Luther to bring Donovan to his senses. Part of her hated having to do this to Donovan, but the stubborn rogue left her no other choice.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Iceni dashed through Donovan's Dublin townhouse, her pulse beating wildly. "Roger!" She searched room after room, looking for Simpson's young protégé. As she entered the drawing room and made her way to the desk, the lad appeared in the doorway.

"Yes, your highness?"

Iceni glanced over her shoulder. The sight that greeted her eyes wasn't exactly what she had expected. The young man stood at the threshold, his hair tousled and his neck cloth twisted to one side.

Iceni opened her mouth to comment on the lad's appearance, but then thought better of it. Snapping her mouth shut, she looked away. "I need your help with a very important task."

Roger rubbed his hands together. "Is it official Protectorate business?"

"You could say so, Roger," Iceni answered. "Yes."

The young valet entered the room and scurried to her side. His excitement was too much for him to conceal.

"I need you to write a letter to Lord Bramwell, telling him you wish to become a vampire." She pulled out the chair behind the desk and offered it to the eager-to-please valet in training.

A hint of mischief sparkled in Roger's eyes. He cocked his head to one side and scrunched his brow. "But I'm quite

content as a mortal Dead Walker. I have no desire to be made vampire. Why would I tell Lord Bramwell that I do?"

Iceni took a deep breath. She reminded herself to keep her temperament in check. "Lord Bramwell is only to believe you wish to be made vampire, and that you are going to Vastos to become one. Once he receives your note, he will return here on the instant."

"Oh, I see. A scheme then." A sly grin edged the young man's lips.

"Yes, Roger, a scheme."

Iceni leaned over the desk and pulled out a square of paper, a brass ink well and a gold-tipped quill. She handed the items to Roger. "You can write, can you not?"

A serious look crossed the valet's face. "Of course, your highness. His lordship sees to the education of all his household staff members. Bless his good soul."

She feigned a smile. Donovan was meticulous about his living quarters, and it stood to reason he'd feel the same about his servants. "Good, then go to work, Roger. And make sure to sign the note in the most legible manner possible. It is imperative Lord Bramwell knows the letter comes from your own hand."

Roger bent over the paper and penned his note. At the end, he moved his hand in an elaborate swerve, signing his name with a decorative curve, and then handed it over for Iceni's inspection.

"Excellent," she said. "Now we wait for the ink to dry."

Simpson entered the room, and Roger bolted from the chair. "Sir," he said, dipping his head in a slight bow.

"Are you behaving, Roger?"

"Of course, sir. I was merely helping her highness in a scheme against his lordship."

"You do understand," Simpson said, "under normal circumstances, we do not engage in schemes against Lord Bramwell."

Roger nodded.

Iceni creased the paper into a folded square and sealed it with wax and Donovan's own signet. She handed the note to Roger.

Simpson eyed the young man with a stern look. "Higgins is round the front with the phaeton. He will take you to his lordship's club at Temple Barr. There, you are to instruct the headman to give the note to Lord Bramwell. Then, find me in the coach immediately following Higgins, and we will head to Bramwell Abbey."

"The Abbey, sir?" Roger accentuated his words, a look of excitement dancing across his face.

"Yes, boy. The Abbey."

"If only me father could see me now." Roger turned to Iceni. "He gave his life for the Protectorate, your highness. I live to do him proud." Tears glistened in the young pup's eyes.

"And you do, Roger," Iceni said.

Simpson swore a whispered oath. "Good grief, man," he said, lightly swatting the side of Roger's head. "We have no time for emotions. Now go, before the sun rises."

Roger made a beeline for the door and scurried out of the drawing room.

Simpson turned to Icení. "His father was one of Donovan's drivers. Uprans attacked the man while he brought one of the coaches from Dun Sidhe back to Dublin. Roger was but five at the time and had no other living relations. His mother died in childbirth. As head of his lordship's household staff, I felt obligated to do justice by the boy. But sometimes I wonder if he'll be the death of me. He can't even tie a bloody neck cloth."

Icení laughed softly. "He is a sheltered young man, nothing more. In time I am sure he will do just fine."

"Hmph," Simpson commented. "Even a vampire can't live that long."

* * * *

Donovan stared into the brandy glass sitting in his hand. This was the fourth drink he had ordered tonight. Or mayhap it was the fifth. He couldn't seem to remember, his thoughts blurring into one swirling vortex.

A servant appeared at his side, extending a silver tray with a single note lying on top. "A message, my lord."

Donovan reached for the sealed letter and removed it from the tray.

"Well, well, Bramwell. I haven't seen you here for several nights. I thought mayhap you had given up on us."

The familiar voice annoyed him. "Unfortunately, for the both of us, Brooks, I fear that will never happen."

"Up for a good game of cards?"

Donovan turned around and stared up into Edward Brook's beady little eyes. "No one else with deep enough pockets tonight, my lord?"

Edward sat down across from him in a vacant chair.

Donovan started to growl, but he checked his temper in time.

"I had the oddest dream the other night, Bramwell."

"Really?" He couldn't care less, but he also couldn't shrug the man off for fear of causing suspicion. His reputation among his peers was on the line at best. To do it more damage would be disaster.

"You were in it."

Now his interest was piqued. "Me? Of all the men you hate, you chose to dream of me? Do you not find that a bit strange, Brooks?"

"Dreams are not something of choice."

Donovan let out a deep sigh. He lifted the brandy snifter to his lips and downed the glass's contents in a single gulp. Then he put the snifter on a small table next to his chair.

"I dreamt I met you in a field at night and we had words about blood sucking creatures."

"Odd indeed. Especially since I have no love for things of science." He tried to make light of the situation. "Now if you had dreamed of Molly McNally, I would indeed say let me in."

Edward chuckled. He rose from his chair. "Are you sure I cannot entice you into even one game of cards, Bram?"

"No, thank you. Mayhap next time."

Edward Brooks shrugged and walked away, fading into the haze of the smoky, whisky-scented air that filled the club's main room.

Donovan returned his attention back to the letter in his lap. He reached for it and undid the seal, opening the note for viewing.

His eyes scanned the paper, and his mind reeled in anger and worry. *Bloody hell*. He'd never let Vastos lay a hand on any of his servants, especially a young pup like the innocent Roger. Some souls were meant to be turned and made vampire, and others were meant to serve the Protectorate in their mortal form. Roger would do best by keeping both his feet planted firmly in the earthly realm. How could he even entertain the idea of being made vampire, and by Vastos of all creatures? That boy would never stand a chance at the dark lord's mercy.

Donovan bolted from his chair and made haste across the room. He was down the stairs and out the front door in a matter of minutes. As he exited the yard's gates, he headed down the street.

"An early night, my lord?"

The familiar voice stopped him in his tracks. He turned to his right. "Higgins. What the devil are you doing here? And with my phaeton?"

"I thought perhaps you might have need of a safe ride home, my lord."

"I am perfectly capable of making my own way home."

"Six brandies make not for a cohesive mind, sir."

Donovan snarled. "I had only five." He counted on his fingers. "No, six. No five."

Higgins stepped down from his seat. "As you can see, my lord, I was correct."

Donovan tossed his arms in the air. "I see where this is leading. I do, I really do."

Higgins gave him a blank stare.

"This is Simpson's doing, is it not? A little scheme to get back at me for my words with him at Dun Sidhe? He knows I hate it when he orders me the phaeton when I prefer to be left alone and walk off my pressing thoughts. Well, two can play at this foolish game."

Donovan surrendered. He gave in to his driver and entered the coach. The entire trip back to Henrietta Street, he cursed up a storm. Mayhap he needed a new valet. And Roger would have to go as well. He certainly could not have the young man around after Simpson had trained him. And he couldn't believe that Higgins was in on it as well. Bloody hell how far had this web of deceit reached? Had he no servants left that could follow simple orders or did they all now take matters into their own hands? He was their master, not Simpson. How could his best people follow a valet's orders and not his word? His staff knew better than to interfere with his plans when he wanted to be left alone. Mayhap he would need an entire new household. The notion angered him beyond anything else.

The phaeton came to a stop. Donovan exited the carriage and stomped up the front steps. He pushed open the door and marched inside, allowing it to slam behind him.

"Simpson! Get your self down here, man! Now! I will not tolerate this any longer." He searched the rooms and ran the length of the main hall, but there was still no sign of the valet anywhere. "Simpson!" He was losing his patience.

A thump echoed from above. Donovan spun on his heel and took the steps two at a time. He headed to the end of the upper hall and his bedroom. He stormed inside and froze dead in his tracks.

Before him stood Icení, her naked body clothed only by a single ray of the moon's silvery glow coming in from the open window.

"My lord," she said in a seductive tone.

"In my own house? How could you, Icení?" He wondered where her Upyran lover was hiding.

She raised an eyebrow in puzzlement.

"Is he here? In my own bed?"

"What are you talking about?"

Donovan approached her, his groin painfully aware of the woman's bare essentials. "Your lover."

"Lover? Are you mad?"

"Vastos's head guard. Do not deny it, Icení. With my own eyes, I saw you with him."

She laughed. "You mean Parthalán?"

"Whatever the bloody hell his name is. I saw how he looked at you, the longing in his eyes. And how you looked back at him."

She reached out her hands and cupped his face. He tried to pull away, but her touch seared his skin in an addictive manner.

"Parthalán was merely helping me stay safe until I could cross the lawns without being burned by the sun or noticed by the other guards. Or until you came."

"I saw him with his arms around you. He kissed you, for the gods' sake!"

"Yes, as a brother. Parthalán and his infant sister were two of the Ceni children that had escaped with me when the Romans came. I could not protect them from Vastos. Eventually the dark lord turned them both."

As her explanation sank in, he felt like a heel. The vampire he hated was actually a soul to whom he owed a great deal for protecting Icení and Conor's son. He raised his hands to Icení's and circled her wrists with his fingers. He lowered her hands away from his face. "I should have trusted you. Forgive me. It is just ... I felt..."

She pulled free of him and raised her finger to his lips. "Say nothing, for there is no need."

Icení reached around to the back of her neck and undid the Ceni relic that dangled from her gold chain. She handed the powerful charm to Donovan. "I am yours alone and yours completely. I give you everything that is mine, even the powers inherited from my tribe."

Donovan wrapped his arms around her body and brought her close to him. "Icení, the Bramwells have a long standing tradition of taking Ceni brides." He kissed the white skin beneath her ear.

"Yes, I guessed as much once I realized your mother was from a branch of the Ceni."

"She was a mortal, as was my grandmother." He swirled his tongue in small circles over her swanlike neck.

"Donovan, I am prepared to do anything that you ask of me."

"Then marry me." He nuzzled her neck with an abundance of kisses.

A cool breeze billowed the drapes. The cold air felt like ice against Icen's growing heat. She fell deeper into Donovan's embrace. His exquisite tongue continued to dance over her skin. Tiny ripples of electric shocks shot through her body, from her neck to the warm apex at the top of her thighs. "Yes, Donovan," she said amidst pure bliss. "I will marry you."

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

When he sat her on the mattress, she reached for his neck cloth and undid the intricately tied cravat, tossing it onto the bed behind her. Then she undid his waistcoat and shirt.

He removed his pants and boots, and then he gently lowered her to the coverlet.

"Tell me about the bite, Donovan," she said. "What did Vastos do to you?"

He settled on the bed next to her, his hand roaming her body. "He bit me, hoping to share my blood to experience life as a quasi. Instead, he turned me into the one creature that could destroy him and unite the Vampyric kingdoms once and for all."

Donovan dipped his head to her neck and traced small circles with the tip of his tongue. His fangs emerged.

"So, the ancient prophecies are true?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes," he said, murmuring against her flesh.

The feel of Donovan's fangs grazing her neck sent her spiraling over the edge.

"Take me Donovan. Mark me as your own."

He tossed back his head, his fangs fully extended. "I have not fed like this in years."

"Neither have I."

Donovan eyed Icen's neck, and then he lowered his head. The sharp prick of a vampire's fangs bit her flesh, searing her skin and sinking deep into her veins. Icen cried out in sheer pleasure, the vampire inside her soul reveling in the sensation.

Donovan had finally claimed her as his, marking her as belonging to the Bramwell tribe. She reached up to him, her fingers dancing across his neck. For the first time in many years her thirst grew great.

"Share with me, Icen," Donovan said. "Take me as I have taken you."

He pulled her with him as he rolled over, pulling her atop him. Icen bit her bottom lip, drawing a droplet of her own blood. The metallic taste sent her into a frenzy. She lowered her head to Donovan's neck and kissed his skin, flicking her tongue back and forth. The pulse of his pumping blood throbbed beneath her lips. The light ticking against her flesh sent ripples of pleasure swarming through her body. Icen opened her mouth and allowed her fangs to fully extend. She

then dipped her head a final time and bit into Donovan's flesh.

The taste of blood was sweet like wine. She drank, taking in all that he had to offer her. In the process she learned a great deal about the vampire with whom she had fallen in love. She shared in Donovan's pain, in his losses, his hopes and his dreams. She learned that he had just about fallen in love with her from the very first time he had met her. The notion touched her heart.

She retracted her fangs, her thirst well sated. She licked her lips, wiping away the fading traces of Donovan's blood. "Now satisfy the mortal in my soul, Donovan."

He smiled up at her, his lips curving into a wicked grin. "That, my lady would be a true pleasure."

He rolled her onto her back and stared down at her.

Iceni ran her hands over his muscled chest, her fingers grazing the hard ripples. She liked what she felt, but her hands didn't stop at his torso. She slid her arm further down, wanting to explore every inch of his body.

His hard member grew long and thick beneath her touch, and he ran the tip of his manhood over her sensitive nub.

She let out a soft sigh.

He reached his fingers between her legs and swirled a single digit over her mound.

The electric touch sent shockwaves through her body. Tiny ripples exploded inside her. She wanted more of him, more of his body and his exquisite caress.

Donovan slid his heated rod lower, and slowly slipped inside her, and she gasped.

He pulled out and then pushed back in again, cautious not to cause her any pain.

The slow, rhythmic motion ignited a greater desire in her. Icení moved her hips, matching his every move. She loved having him inside her, filling her, sending the very depths of her senses spilling over the edge.

He picked up the pace, moving in and out of her with greater urgency, and she cried out as spasms of pleasure rocked her body.

Then Donovan called out her name and fell on top of her, spent and satisfied. She ran her fingers through his damp hair.

She was finally one with the man the gods had chosen as her husband. "Donovan?"

"Yes, my love?" he answered, his voice husky and sounding slightly tired.

"I love you with all my heart."

He kissed her neck, then lifted his head and caressed her lips with his. "And I love you, Icení. You're my world, my everything."

Donovan's words filled her heart. The void she'd had since losing her family and tribe now seemed almost gone. She'd never forget her people, but life with Donovan would make each day easier to live.

Epilogue

Five months later...

Donovan stood at the window, his eyes transfixed on the scene playing out before him on the west lawns. Thanks to the cloudy day, he finally had an opportunity to watch Conor and Samuel in daylight. Conor tumbled with his son, the boy chasing him halfway across the greens. The man ran and rolled, laughed and shouted in happiness. He finally shook his head at the boy and signaled with his hands that he had had enough. A nanny came to Conor's rescue.

When Conor left the yard and headed his way, Donovan laughed as he watched Samuel run away from the nanny, screaming joyfully. He was glad Dun Sidhe had become a place of laughter once more. The ancient castle had been quiet for far too long.

Conor entered the library and headed toward the table that held the liquor tray. "He has more energy than I can ever hope to have," he said with labored breathing. He poured himself a glass of port and then turned back to face Donovan. "Care to join me?"

Donovan shook his head, declining the offer. "Samuel's a fine boy," he said "Just like his father—persistent, intelligent and a bit stubborn." He smiled. "He reminds me exactly of you."

"Do you really think me stubborn, Bram?"

"Yes, very much so. Especially when you insist upon calling me by that horrendous name, despite my constant telling you

otherwise. You know how I hate it when my family name is shortened. It's Bramwell."

"And you call me stubborn?"

"Touché," Donovan said, smiling.

Conor let out a deep sigh.

"Something troubling you?" The sense of grief emanating from Conor's soul was one of great concern. Donovan worried about the man, but found penetrating the depths of his mind impossible at the moment. Whatever troubled Conor was hidden deep within the walls of the man's heart.

His friend leaned against the other side of the windowpane, facing him. "Now that my father has died, my son is safe. No more witch hunts for him. I should be happy, but instead that concern is replaced by another worry."

"How so?"

"My meeting with my brother went well. I told him everything and he is fine with it. In fact, he welcomes me and my son to his house." Conor took another swig of port, emptying the glass. "I have spent my fortune on finding my son, and my father's will provided nothing more for me. I do not know what to do for Samuel. I won't have him living at his uncle's mercy, no matter how generous my brother may be. I need to make a new life for Samuel and me."

Donovan knew from past experience that Conor was not the type of man to take charity from anyone, least of all from him. But mayhap the offer of a job would suffice. "Are you still dealing in antiquities?"

"Yes. I have a few rare items in my possession, most of them left to me by my mother. I had hoped to save them for

Samuel as a part of his inheritance, but considering my present financial situation, I have decided to sell them. I hope to find a buyer in due time, and then perhaps I can start over with the monies earned from the sale."

Donovan reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold piece in the shape of an X "What can you tell me about this?" He tossed the item to Conor.

His friend caught it in midair and brought it into the dim sunlight at the window. He squinted, studying the piece, and then took a step back. "First century, gold, the inscription is written in an ancient Vampyric script, a now dead form of Upyran." He looked over at Donovan, then handed back the trinket.

"There is a position open in the Protectorate, Conor. I would be more than happy to see you fill it."

Conor gave him a cautious stare. "I owe you everything, Donovan. But I am not ready to become a vampire."

He laughed. "No, not vampire. I was referring to a mortal position, that of curator of antiquities of the Protectorate collection."

"Curator?"

"Yes. We have a great need for someone who can oversee the priceless collection of magical amulets, cursed swords, ancient armor, and the like. How many mortals do you know who could identify an Upyran gold piece ordered by Vastos?"

"Good God, you mean that bastard actually has a gold piece minted in his name?" A look of true shock veiled the man's face. "Well, I will have to remember that and record it in my book of ancient findings."

Donovan laughed. The man never ceased to amaze him. "Your knowledge of such items would be a great benefit to the organization. And the position pays well. You can return to the lifestyle you were accustomed to living."

Brightness returned to Conor's face. "I do love working with antiquities, especially those of the cursed world. My father would turn in his grave."

"The position also offers housing," Donovan said. "Castle Casterley is the official home of the collection and of the staff that tends to it."

"Oh, Donovan," Conor beamed. "A room there for me and for Samuel would be splendid."

The man still didn't get the full notion of his offer. "I am not offering a room for you and a room for Samuel."

A blush flushed Conor's cheeks. "Forgive me, I did not mean to sound so greedy. One room will be more than adequate. Once I am on my feet, I will be able to find my son and me proper lodgings."

Donovan tossed back his head in amusement. "No, man. I am offering you the run of the castle. Not just two rooms."

"The entire castle? Well, there must be over forty rooms."

Donovan nodded. "Forty seven, to be exact, not counting the hidden chambers and vaults. Your staff is housed in cottages on the property."

"Donovan, I do not know what to say!"

"Say you will take me up on my offer and be done with it."

"Fine." Conor offered Donovan his hand. "You have found yourself a new curator for the Protectorate's antiquities collection."

Outside, Samuel waved his pudgy little hands, trying to catch a butterfly. His nanny looked weary, beads of sweat dotting the woman's forehead. "I had better get back out there. That poor woman does not look as if she is having a good go of it today."

Conor placed his glass of port back on the liquor tray and headed out of the room.

Donovan returned his attention to Samuel. Conor and his son reminded him of the happy times he had once shared with his own father.

A soft touch caressed his shoulder. *Iceni*.

"Do you think if our child is born a boy, he will be as energetic as Samuel? Or if it be born a girl, do you think she will be a quiet child? Or mayhap regardless of it being a boy or girl, do we need to concern ourselves more with the Vampire or the mortal side within its soul?"

"Well, should our child be born a..." He stopped mid-sentence and turned around. "Are you trying to tell me something, my dear *Iceni*?"

"I have been trying to tell you something for the last several hours, your lordship. But I keep getting interrupted, first by Simpson, then by Conor and now by you and your distracted mind."

He reached for *Iceni* and pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her waist. He kissed her, his lips meeting hers in a hungry tango.

"I hope this will be the first of many children for us, Donovan," *Iceni* said, pulling her lips away from his. "I want a house full of happy, smiling children."

He gently kissed the top of her head. The sweet aroma of lavender mixed with roses wafted to his nose, enticing his senses. "I love you, Icení," he whispered. "I love you more than life itself."

"Save the girl ... " His father's words from ages ago echoed in his ear. After all these years, he had finally saved the girl, and in doing so had saved himself. His father, he now knew, could finally rest in peace.

He prayed to the gods that Vastos would refrain from hatching out his next scheme until after Icení gave birth. He'd at least like to enjoy some time with his family before concerning himself once more with the Upyrans. For Donovan knew too well that his war with Vastos was far from over.

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