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Mira

By Leighann Phoenix

Dedication

To Meegs,

*Thanks for your critical eye, your honest commentary, and your encouragement.
But most of all, thank you for your friendship.*

Chapter 1

Trembling in the warm light of the setting sun, Mira stared into the icy darkness of the cave, her white shift blowing slightly in the breeze. Her mind raced endlessly, trying to remind her of why she chose this, attempting to dull the fear in the pit of her stomach, and reminding her of the importance of what she was about to do.

Average in all ways, Mira had average brown hair, average brown eyes, average weight, average height, average intelligence, and average bravery. She was just average. So it was no surprise, even with her education and knowledge of the decision being her own, that she had been dreading this moment since she watched the first of her sisters commit to the path. Mira couldn't believe it was finally her turn, as the last of this generation.

Stop thinking! I'm only making it worse, she told herself. I'm sure it won't be nearly as bad as I'm imagining. Perhaps going first and dying young would have been better than living a longer life in fearful anticipation of this moment. To think, if the last girl had lived only a month or so longer, I would have been too old and one of the newest generations would be standing here now. I would become a teacher and spend the rest of a long, normal life, in the sunshine.

Her heart raced, as she peered into each shadow. *He could be here already, watching, waiting. I would never know it.* Mira pictured him as some kind of vicious, desperate creature. The druids had kept him around for centuries, hiding him in the recesses of the mountain caverns. Mira often contemplated what type of man could live like that. She could hear the lessons running through her head. She considered what

may have been left out of the teaching. Mira had even helped to teach the new generation of girls about him.

Stop thinking so hard, Mira told herself again. Her hands fidgeted at her sides. Feet shuffled. *I'm only making it worse. I'm sure my imagination is more frightening than this will actually be. Somehow that's little reassurance*, her brain argued. Mira took several deep breaths. The voice of the high priestess, Lilith, droned out over the audience. Mira had long since stopped listening to the words, but she almost felt every syllable, like grains of sand raining on her skin as they sifted through the hourglass she felt trapped in.

"Rillan ap Tiernay," Lilith intoned over the crowd, "was created to protect and serve the Circle. Our guardian. Each generation a group of girls is chosen as companions in darkness. This is the price of his loyalty."

Mira didn't hear Lilith's speech. Not that it mattered. She knew the speech by heart. It was the same for each of the girls who entered the vampire's cave. Mira's mind was more concerned with the parts of the story that were left out of the flowery farewell.

Each girl given to the vampire was there to feed him until she died or asked him to kill her. Then she was replaced by another. Once she was sent into the caves, she would not emerge again until her death. Rillan left only when there was an assignment from the druids, by his own choice. Every girl who entered the cave believed that maybe she would be different. *Maybe I won't want to die*. Most survived several months. The longest lived ten years or so. The girl before Mira lasted three weeks.

When Mira collected that girl's body from the stone altar just outside the cave entrance, it had been a sobering experience. The other times that Mira performed the duty, there was a feeling of detachment. She rarely even looked at the girls' faces, let alone the rest of their bodies. She had never been next in line before.

Mira remembered staring at the pasty white skin pulled tight over skeletal features for a long time. She had examined the numerous vicious bite marks that riddled the shoulders and neck of the dead girl. Mira had bathed the body for burial and found the bruises on the girl's arms showing how she was held down. Mira found the blood along the inside of her thighs. Her body itself was shriveled, drained of blood and starved of food. Mira had no idea what exactly the girl suffered over the three weeks that she was inside the cave. She tried to tell herself that anything imagined would be worse than what actually had happened, but was having little success in reassuring herself. *He is a good man. Our guardian. The other girls simply weren't strong enough*, she told herself.

Mira looked up from her thoughts to find that the high priestess had stopped speaking. Everyone was waiting for Mira to finish the ceremony. They were patient and stood quietly. Mira didn't know how long they waited for her to realize it was her turn. Now as she looked around, she was more afraid of what was to happen to her than she thought she would be. The lessons were all so cut and dried, so matter of fact. *This is what we do to survive. If not for Rillan their Circle would have been found, their secret knowledge would have been stolen, and they would have been destroyed long ago. The sacrifices are all voluntary. The girls go to him as a service to their people. I*

volunteered for this duty without prompting from anyone. Still, she couldn't stop her mind from churning.

Mira stepped shakily forward. The moon, high in the sky now, cast a blood red sheen over the clearing and an eerie light beyond the gate. She passed through the tall, rusted iron gateway, and it creaked, swinging shut behind her. The clanking gate lock sent a jolt through Mira. The last of her courage was locked on the other side. She looked into the darkness beyond the mouth of the cave, trying to see if he was watching. She couldn't see anything. The little light that touched the hungry cave mouth was swallowed into the black, offering no hint of what lay within. In all the times she had delivered food or other supplies here, it never seemed this ominous.

The unkempt clearing in front of the cave was unlike the other gardens kept by the druids. The plants and trees along the perimeter were rotting and overgrowing the gate, breaking it down in places. There was the carved stone altar at the center of the clearing. That was where he would leave her body after her death, so that the druids would know that it was time for a new sacrifice. There was the table where they would leave food for her and any supplies that she requested. There was the stone basin where letters could be left. She was never to speak to anyone except Rillan from now until her death. It was as though she was taking inventory of her new life as she looked at each cold thing in the clearing in turn. She could almost feel loneliness creeping up on her, like a demon in the dark.

Mira turned around to see if the others were still watching. No one was there. The gate was locked and she was standing alone. All that was left for her was to enter

the cave and find him. Her eyes traveled the twisted metal archway that she studied so many times in the past. Now it was backward as she stood on the wrong side. Finally.

Liam ap Arnauk watched Mira from the darkness beneath the trees at the edge of the clearing around the gates that guarded the cave entrance. He always thought it ironic that they bothered to “guard” the thing inside the cave. A single tear formed in the corner of his eye, as he waited. In all their time together Mira rarely acknowledged him. They both knew her fate. He wondered if she had any idea how he felt for her at all.

How could I have fallen in love with one of the chosen cursed? Liam turned away from the scene. He couldn’t bring himself to watch her so willingly go to her own death. He had done his best to keep her from this, subtly making sure that she wouldn’t be picked until the last wasn’t an easy task. His father, Arnauk, had been one of the elders until his recent death. That position gave Liam some small influence over minor affairs. If the girl who preceded Mira had survived only a little longer, then Mira would have been too old, and the next generation of girls would have come of age.

I suppose I’ll not be the last man to lose someone to the vampire, he thought and shambled back to town.

Resolutely, Mira took a deep breath and walked toward the cave mouth. *Best to get this over with.* The breeze blew her shift around her legs. There were rumors that he would insist that she walk about naked after he took her. That was why the sacrifices didn’t bring clothes with them into his home. The dirt floor was packed hard, and her bare feet made a soft padding sound as she entered the darkness. Mira lifted

the front of her shift so that she wouldn't step on it as she stooped under a low ceiling in the tunnel and continued farther into the darkness.

Rillan must live like an animal in here, she thought. The stone wall was cold and damp under her hand, as she used it to guide her way. *I wonder if he'll come get me or if I'll wander in here for hours before finding my way. The least he could do is provide some light.* Mira was beginning to become frustrated and more frightened. She couldn't see in the black and she was tripping on either her shift or loose stone. Suddenly there was a swishing noise, like something flying. Screaming, she fell to her knees, scraping them hard on the ground. Stone bit into the palm of her hand.

Mira held her wrist and turned to sit on the floor with her back against the wall. *What if I took a wrong turn or missed some sign.* The tunnels were rumored to be endless so that no one could find Rillan should he choose to not be found. It was a test of the new sacrifices. The girls were supposed to find him to prove that they were worthy. *Some test, stumbling around in pitch black, down caves with no end, looking for something that I don't want to find and doesn't want to be found.*

Mira began to cry. She knew that she had only been here a few minutes, five maybe fifteen, but it felt like forever. So she waited. *I'll not be fool enough to wander around in her. If he wants me, he can come get me*, she thought fearfully defiant. Without being able to see the moon or sky, Mira couldn't tell how much time passed. Eventually, she fell asleep leaning against the wall.

When she opened her eyes, Mira could see daylight streaming in from the entrance. It was only about a hundred feet away. *I was certain I had gone a little*

farther than this, she thought, feeling stupid and a little guilty. She couldn't see any deeper into the cave than maybe fifty more feet ahead of her. Mira stood up. She didn't know why he hadn't come looking for her. *He must know that the sacrifice was last night.*

Daylight chased away the fear, but now she was worried that he would be angry at her for taking so long to come to him. Now she could see there was only one way to go. The cave went on into the mountainside in a straight line, from what she could tell.

Gathering her courage, she stood up, brushed herself off, and marched into the darkness again. This time she kept one hand on the wall and one above her head, in front of her, in case the ceiling dropped again. It wasn't long before the hall curved, and the packed dirt beneath her bare feet changed to stone. Mira bent down to touch the ground and found that it felt like stonework; like the floor had been carved. It certainly didn't feel like natural stone. Fascinated, she traced one pavestone with her fingers. What fear she had left was replaced with curiosity, as she stood up and continued to follow the wall through the darkness.

Farther into the cave, the wall changed to the touch. The stone went from roughly hewn to carved like a castle wall. *Just like the floor*, she thought. Mira moved more quickly down the hall. She wasn't afraid of the ceiling dropping again, so she put her hand out in front of her like a blind man feeling for obstacles in his path.

When her hand on the wall ran across wood, she stopped. Mira's breath increased as she felt the wooden slats under her hand, held together by ironwork and bolts. Sliding over the surface, her hand found the doorknob. Heart pounding in her chest, Mira wondered if she found him. *That wasn't so hard*, she thought with a

strange, smug sense of accomplishment. She turned the knob, and the door opened onto more blackness. "Hello," she called, but there was nothing.

Mira stepped slowly, blindly into the room, hands held out in front of her. She almost fell over, when her foot hit something with a loud thud that echoed out the door and down the hallway. She knelt down and felt some kind of crate. On her hands and knees Mira reached out around herself and found that there were a number of crates scattered around the floor.

She was about to leave the crate where it was and try to move around it, when the thought occurred to her that she may have found a store room. Mira pushed the lid off the crate and found it full of fabric of some kind. She crawled around on the floor groping about until she found another crate and pushed the lid off that one. This crate contained jars. *It is a store room*, her thoughts raced excitedly. When she ran into a wall, she felt her way up and found shelves. One at a time she carefully felt her way along the shelves. There were books, small boxes, small jars, more fabric, paper, scrolls. Finally she found what she was looking for, a lantern. There were several lanterns on that part of the shelf.

She pulled down one of the lanterns and felt the weight of it. She guessed it already held oil in it. *Now all I need are matches*. She felt her way along the shelves until she found some bags that would fit in the palm of her hand. Running her fingers over the soft material she prodded each bag to guess at the contents, trying to find what she needed. The first one held something small and round, the next something square. She didn't know what the things were but they weren't matches, so she moved on. She was about to give up, when she found a small light bag that held what felt like numerous

tiny sticks. The matches were on the shelf almost directly under the lanterns. She smiled and shook her head. as she took one of the thin wooden sticks out of the bag.

Mira paused, holding the match in her hand. The lantern was ready. She would finally be able to see where she was going. It was strange, but a funny kind of fear pulled at her stomach again. She had been so obsessed with what she was doing that she almost forgot why she was in this dark place. Suddenly it felt as if she was being watched. He could be right next to her, and she wouldn't know it. Her mind raced irrationally. She imagined striking the match and having an evil face appear in the light staring at her.

"Hello," she called meekly into the dark. *Maybe I don't want to see*, she thought.

"Get a hold of yourself," she scolded herself. The sound of her voice was comforting. Mira struck the match on the floor and lit the lantern. To her relief, when light flooded the room, all she found were opened crates and shelves of stored goods. If she didn't know better she would have thought that she was in some domus store room. Not in a cave, deep in a mountain, looking for a vampire who would inevitably drain the life out of her. Not that the idea of being in a castle wasn't strange either. *Hell, where else would a vampire live?*

Mira took another deep breath, held the lantern out and left the room. It was much easier going now. The light gave her confidence. It turned out that the rumors were correct. There were quite a few halls that criss-crossed, now that she was in the manmade section of the tunnels. *How am I going to find him*, she asked herself, as she looked down several hallways. She couldn't see any more doors and all the halls looked basically the same.

She tried listening carefully down the halls for some noise, but didn't hear anything. "Hello," she called down one of the halls, her voice stronger than before. The only sound she heard was her own "hello" echoing back at her. She called down one of the other halls. Again her voice echoed back. When she called down the third hall it was different. "Hello," she called again. "No echo. There's something different down there, stopping the echo."

Mira rallied her courage and strode down the hallway. After a short distance and a couple turns, she found doors. Staying herself to face the worst, she opened the first door and held up the lantern. The room appeared to be a library of sorts. Books lined shelves against the walls, and several shelves were freestanding in the middle of the room. A well used chair and a table stood on a threadbare rug. A large assortment of papers and writing things lay scattered across a small desk, and a pile of crumpled papers heaped up against the wall in one corner. Mira stepped back into the hall. "What kind of vampire assassin collects books," she whispered. "And writes poetry," she added in confusion, looking at what was written on the papers.

Leaving, she closed the door behind herself and continued down the hallway. Tapestries hung on the walls between the doors. Most of them were battle scenes, elaborately woven and well kept. Mira started to open another door, when a sound caught her attention.

At first she thought she may be losing her mind. *Metal ringing? Sword fighting clanging?* She followed the sound of metal crashing against metal. It was all so strange. *This was never covered in the lessons*, she thought. The clashing noises became louder, as she walked down the hall. When she came to the large double

wooden doors at the end of the hall, the sounds stopped. She half thought that he must have heard her coming. Light streamed from under the large carved, wooden, double doors that filled the end of the hallway in front of her.

Mira's stomach churned. She hadn't eaten breakfast, and she could feel bile rise in her throat. She wished that the clanging would start again. The silence was dreadful. Finally she reached out and turned the well worn handle on the door. It released easily, and the door swung silently in, letting light fill the hallway from the multitude of candles in the wrought iron chandelier that hung from the high ceiling.

Mira didn't really see him at first. She was looking for a monster; some pale, gaunt, angry beast that would fall upon her and drain the life from her body. What she saw was much different. Rillan ap Tiernay was tall, muscular, clean shaven, and well dressed. The stories described him as noble and brave, before he was made into a vampire. Mira, like those who came before her, believed that the man of legend changed when he was turned into a bloodsucking assassin. Obviously she was wrong. His dark blue eyes were set in a handsome, tanned, angular face which was framed with black hair. He wore leather armor, brown breeches, and boots. He could have been any man from one of the nomadic hunter tribes to the north. A sword leaned against a dummy standing next to him. It was dressed in armor as well and held a severely battered shield.

Rillan was larger than most of the men in her village. Legend told that he wasn't originally a druid, nor was he from her village. He was one of the warrior classes in the druid nations before the militant civilizations to the south had assimilated them. He

came to the druid's inner sanctum seeking a way of vengeance against the onslaught of would be conquerors.

Although Mira committed the legends to memory, she always questioned them to some extent. Her people, being a logical culture, had long held the belief that stories often changed or were exaggerated over time. Heroes became more heroic, and villains became more evil with each retelling. It was hard to say how much of the original stories were true. Only in recent decades had her people begun writing the histories down. Lord Tiernay's story was centuries old. He was probably the only one who still knew the truth of it.

Just as she was measuring him, he stood measuring her. She knew what he would see. She never thought of herself as anything special. Worse, she had been wandering around in the dark and had fallen on the ground. Her hand and knees were scraped, dirty, and bloody. She had no hair brush, and hadn't washed in days.

"Come in girl." His accent was heavy, guttural, and strong, as if he barely spoke the language. "You've been more resourceful than most of the others. I believe you are the first to actually find a lantern and get here without being lost in the labyrinth for a few days."

Mira found herself annoyed by the comment and almost forgot she was afraid. "Do you find it amusing to let us grope about in the dark, frightened and lost for several days?"

Rillan walked toward her. His purposeful strides made her wonder if this was it. He was going to bite her. She let out a yelp and fell back against the door, dropping the lantern on the floor with a clatter. His ice blue eyes bore into her.

“No,” he replied low and warning. “I don’t find it amusing. However, I do find that after a few days, even my company is looked upon as a welcome alternative to being alone, hungry, and thirsty in the labyrinth. Usually when they see me after the darkness they don’t jump in fear.” He stepped back from her, giving her enough space to relax a bit. “Like you did.”

Mira felt a little ashamed. “I didn’t— I mean I’m not—” She stammered, trying to find the words to explain why her lessons hadn’t properly prepared her to take on her duties with more strength.

He cut her off. “I’m used to it.” As he spoke he stepped toward her again, this time as a person would approach a frightened animal. Cautiously, he leaned in and breathed heavily. Mira got the impression that he was smelling her. When he pulled away, his pupils bled into the rest of his eyes until they were solid black. Then he blinked, and it was like she had been seeing things.

“I’ll show you where your room is,” he said. Turning from her, he went back to the dummy, picked up the sword, and strode from the room. Mira took a moment to collect herself before following him. She almost forgot the lantern. As he disappeared into the darkness, she grabbed it and hurried to catch up.

She followed him back down the hallway she came from. He opened one of the doors toward the very beginning of the hall. It led into another hallway which was lined with more tapestries and doors.

As he guided her down the hall, Mira tentatively asked, “Is it always this dark in here?”

Rillan abruptly stopped, turned around to look at her, and grabbed a candle off a sconce on the wall. He tossed it to her. "These are your quarters. This hall and these rooms. There are candles. You can light them if you wish, but the rest of the chamber is mine. There it is always dark." With that, he turned around and led her to the door at the far end of the hall. Pushing the door open, he walked into the room and crossed the floor to a fireplace set into the far wall. Rillan picked up a match, struck it on the floor, and tossed it into the fireplace.

As the fire spread light and warmth through the room Mira realized how cold she had been to this point. "Explore the rooms in this hall. You'll find a small store room. There should be everything you need to feed yourself or make clothes. It'll probably take you a while to bore yourself with what's there. If you decide you need something I can be found usually where you found me tonight." He stood and appeared to be leaving.

"Lord Tiernay," Mira started and almost didn't finish the question when he turned to look at her. "Um, what about you?" She spoke slowly and trembled.

"You're not ready yet," he said and left, leaving her staring after him dumbfounded.

* * * *

I've never seen such a beautiful room, Mira thought, looking around the room. As she lit candles set on woven metal sconces, light fell on a large canopy bed covered with silken blankets.

A carved mahogany wardrobe stood against one stone wall, and she opened it to find that it was full of dresses. A morbid feeling went through her body, as she realized

that these were the clothes of women who were previously Lord Tiernay's companions. She sighed. *They're still beautiful clothes. The women who made them must have had a great deal of time and talent.*

A matching carved mahogany dressing table with a large mirror graced another wall. Silver hair combs and several brushes lay scattered across the table. A jewelry box stood open with a number of necklaces dangling over the sides. Inside were quite a few silver and gold bracelets and broaches.

The sick feeling in the pit of Mira's stomach returned. *It almost looks as though the last girl to live in this room left it open and may be back at any moment. If I hadn't cleaned her body for burial myself, I may wonder if she would be walking down the hall to find me here.* Mira rubbed her stomach absently, thinking about the fact that she was merely the latest in a series of women who all lived and died in this room.

Deciding she would never use any of the things on the dressing table, Mira searched the room for something less thought provoking to look at. A dining table with wine glasses, plates, forks, knives, and spoons filled a nook near the fireplace. A pot brimmed with cooking implements sat happily on the hearth near the fire, as if waiting to be used. It reminded her that she hadn't eaten in quite some time, and her stomach growled loudly in response to the realization.

I wonder if the elders know that he keeps the sacrifices like this, and it's left out of the lessons on purpose. After she examined everything in the bedroom, she set about making herself dinner and deciding on plans for how to keep herself busy until Lord Tiernay came to her for his own meal.

Chapter 2

Lord Tiernay had been right. It took her a couple weeks to explore the other rooms in her chambers. She found a small library. It didn't have nearly as many books as the room she found that first day. Even so, there were more than enough books to keep her busy for some time. A couple she found of particular interest appeared to be diaries of previous inhabitants of her rooms. Mira set those aside for a night she wanted to give herself nightmares.

Mira found the store room containing meats and vegetables and realized instantly that this was where the items the druids left at the cave entrance went. It appeared as though Lord Tiernay gathered the things and placed them in the store room when she was unaware. *Maybe he does it when I'm sleeping.* She couldn't think of any other time he would be able to get into that room without her seeing him.

A big open room with mirrors covering the walls was particularly beautiful and perplexing at the same time. *Mirrors of that size would have been very expensive and even more difficult to bring here,* Mira thought as she stood in front of one which was taller than herself and three times as wide. The mirrors all had different sized carved frames.

The strangely enchanting, eerie room held Mira's attention for hours. She turned round and round watching herself in all the mirrors by candlelight. She wondered what the room was for. *Dancing maybe? There were a number of musical instruments in the store room. Maybe he's had some sacrifices that could play or dance.*

The next room was smallish and decorated with sea shells and other water things. In the center of the room stood a large, metal, claw foot bathing tub. Space for a small fire or hot coals was beneath the tub, and a warmer for extra water waited next to it. Towels and a dressing gown adorned a rack near a comfortably cushioned chair. There was also a tub for washing her clothes on the far wall, but the bathtub kept her attention.

Water in the basin next to the tub appeared clear and clean, as did the water in the tub itself. With some excitement, Mira lit the coals under the tub. Then she lit the coals under the warming basin for more water and went to the library for a book while she waited for the water to warm. Returning to the room with a small, leather-bound poetry book, Mira set it on the chair and began to take off her clothes. Momentarily she glanced around. She always wondered if he was watching her, but the feeling was more palpable when she was undressing or trying to fall asleep. Still she managed to undress and quickly got into the water. An odd sense of safety enveloped her when the water covered her body, and she reached for her book.

As Mira lounged in her bath, it occurred to her that she was being pampered probably as well as any noble in the domus to the south. *Lord Tiernay certainly knows how to try and keep his women happy*, she thought. Unfortunately, that thought led to morbid ideas. *If he's so good at making sure his women have everything they could want that only leaves a couple alternatives. The women beg for death because he is so vicious in his feeding, or they die from the loneliness.*

Mira grew up with many people always around. Continued explorations of her chambers brought her to realize exactly how solitary this life was. *He must keep us*

alone so that we won't run away. A person doesn't long for something as badly, if she's not being tempted by it.

After she was familiar with everything her chambers had to offer, she dedicated nearly all her time to reading the books in her small library. They were mostly history books or folklore. Some of them were in languages she didn't know. Other books were so old they all but fell apart when she picked them up. *Perhaps if I get too incredibly bored I could spend some time rewriting the more badly damaged ones.* Periodically she glanced at the diaries from the deceased girls before her, but studiously found other things to read.

Eventually, she set herself a routine. She found that her water was replaced regularly, and her store room was continually replenished. There were occasions that she felt as though she was being watched. But she was never able to catch him in her chambers even when she tried to wait up and see him.

Several weeks' worth of her solitary existence, in what she came to see as a prison, eventually made her desperate enough for company, and she ventured out the door at the farthest end of the hall. Carrying a lantern in one hand, wearing one of the simpler dresses, and walking cautiously down the hall, she listened for signs that Lord Tiernay was nearby. She managed to find her way to the room where she originally met him.

Dark silence permeated the room. The wrought iron chandelier hanging from the ceiling, which had previously filled the room with warm light, disappeared into the recesses of the ceiling where her lantern light didn't reach. Suddenly Mira was

overwhelmed by the irrational fear that she would never see or hear or speak to another person ever again. “Hello,” she whimpered into the darkness, but there was no answer.

She walked around the room looking for another door or some clue as to where he may be. She hadn’t really realized how lonely she was. Somewhere in her mind, all this time she thought he was just down the hall. Now, standing here in the empty room where he should be, she felt as though her entire body was going numb. She continued her search for another door, hoping she would find a different way out. When she came back to the door she came in and found nothing, she fell to sitting on the ground in the middle of the doorway and began to cry.

She didn’t care what he would do to her now. She only wanted some company; any company. As she sat sobbing, a gentle hand gripped her shoulder.

“Shh. I’m here.” His voice seemed, at that moment, to be the most exquisite sound in the world. She turned to see him bending on one knee behind her, and she flung her arms around his neck. He held her and spoke softly, stroking her hair and waiting for her to stop crying. “I understand. Calm down.”

They remained on the floor for several minutes, before Mira finally managed to quiet her sobs and stop the flow of tears down her cheeks.

“Mira, come with me,” Rillan coaxed, as he helped her stand up.

She left the lantern on the floor, holding onto Rillan. He led her through the darkness and set her in a large armchair. She could make out his shape in the darkness on the edge of the lantern light, as he lit the fireplace that was near the chair. Light spilled into the room from the fireplace, forming an intimate circle of warmth

around the hearth. Stepping over to the lantern that was still sitting on the floor, Rillan picked it up and blew it out, then set it on the floor next to Mira's chair.

"You picked a bad time to look for company. I was sleeping." Rillan sat down on the edge of the chair across from Mira. He leaned forward, with his elbows on his knees and stared at her bleary-eyed.

"Um, is it nighttime," Mira asked tentatively. She felt as though she had forgotten how to have a conversation.

"No. I usually sleep during the day." Rillan's voice was resolute and almost harsh, as if she had insulted him, or he thought she shouldn't have asked.

Mira wasn't sure what to say to him. She knew that he slept during day. She had been taught that. Why couldn't she think of anything intelligent to say? All she knew was that she didn't want him to go away and leave her right then. "I, I'm sorry to have awakened you. Um, do you need to go back to sleep?"

Rillan didn't answer right away. He had been up several days and wasn't overly interested in consoling his latest sacrifice. He couldn't see this one lasting very long. She may be resourceful and bright, but she was scared out of her mind. "I would prefer to go back to sleep."

"But you'll stay," Mira said too quickly.

Rillan sighed and sat back in the chair. "Alright. What do you want to talk about?"

Mira's mind raced. She didn't really know what she wanted to talk about. She just didn't want to stay alone in her room any longer.

Rillan cleared his throat impatiently and Mira panicked. “Um, this isn’t what I expected when I came here,” she said uncertainly.

He smiled wickedly at her. Mira’s eyes widened as she saw his fangs. “What did you expect?”

“I guess, uh, I thought...”

“You thought that I would rape you, then suck your body dry and leave you to die.”

Mira swallowed. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Isn’t it?”

“What happened to the others then?” Mira couldn’t help but ask.

Rillan’s dark blue eyes seemed to look into her. “Do you really think you’re ready for that?”

“I can’t think of anything else right now,” she whispered.

Rillan’s eyes turned solid black, and his voice dropped to a deadly soft tone. “I waited until they were lonely enough to come to me. Then I seduced them. I used them as long as they were willing. When they couldn’t live with the idea of me any longer, regardless of how lonely they were, I offered them death. The ones who accepted what I am, lived longer. The ones who feared me died sooner.”

“The ones who lived longer, why did they decide to die in the end,” Mira asked softly.

“It’s easy enough for you to pretend that you’re happy and in love, until the druids give me an assignment. Each of the ones who lived with me at length asked to die

within days after I returned from an assassination. Most live until the first night I chose to feed.” The emphasis he put on feed sounded like a threat.

“You mean you only have to... to... uh... feed,” she could barely say it, “when you choose to?”

He exaggerated his smile, making his fangs stand out more. “Not quite as simple as that. I feed when I need to, or when I choose to. Are you offering?”

Mira shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “I don’t know. That’s what I was sent here for. Does it hurt?”

Rillan’s smile fell. “The druids have failed me in this respect. They were supposed to send me companions. But their teachings seem, in recent years, to result in girls coming to me afraid of the hunger and unknowing of the rest of their duties.”

Mira suddenly realized what was going on and was overcome with pity for him. “You’re angry because you’re alone,” she said softly.

“You are the clever one,” he said sarcastically. “Did it never occur to your teachers that it seems I go through girls much more quickly of late?”

Mira shifted uneasily again.

Rillan could hear the increase in her heart rate. “What?”

Mira jumped in her seat at his quick question. “What?”

He shook his head, as if he didn’t believe her response. “Yes, what. What exactly about my comment caused you to become nervous?”

Mira’s eyes dropped. “Oh.” She sat a moment in thought. She didn’t want to insult him anymore than she already had. She felt so sorry for him at this point that she almost forgot she was frightened of him. Almost.

Rillan grew more annoyed, waiting for her response. He stood up. "I'm tired. If you've had enough conversation for one night I'll take my leave."

"No!" Mira stood up. "Don't go yet."

"Then answer my question."

Mira looked away from him again and walked over to the fire. Haltingly she said, "I guess they think that the, uh, deaths have increased because you're growing more--"

Mira heard his footsteps behind her. "Bloodthirsty," he asked, finishing her sentence. She felt his breath on her neck. "Cruel? Vicious?"

Mira turned around to find herself face to face with him. "Yes," she blurted, suddenly feeling brave. "Are you trying to frighten me?"

He backed her into the fire hearth and pinned her against it, placing his hands on the mantle on either side of her. "What advantage would I possibly have by frightening you?"

She could feel the heat behind her and tried to push her way out of his arms, but he countered her movements and smiled at her, baring his fangs again. Her eyes widened, still she pushed the fear down. "I suppose that you would have the same advantage in frightening me this way as you had in frightening me by leaving me to wander alone in the dark or by leaving me alone in my room for weeks on end."

He was taken aback by her confrontation. "What if I were to tell you that I haven't eaten in weeks?" The black of his pupils bled out through the blue again. "How brave will you be when I decide to take you to my bed? Are you so lonely yet that you'll give in to that?"

Mira swallowed hard. "I don't know. Why are you being so manipulative?"

Rillan moved away from her. She barely caught the change in his expression, before he turned. "I'm done for this day. Go back to your rooms." Rillan headed toward the door.

He had almost vanished completely into the darkness, when Mira realized what he was doing and called after him. "I know why." She heard his footsteps stop. "You give us two choices. You or complete and utter loneliness. That's why we can't talk with anyone but you. That's why this place is so dark and frightening. Then you wait until we are so desperate from the loneliness that we willingly submit to anything if only to be near another body. In a strange way you've set yourself up to be a savior, so that you don't have to rape us."

Rillan's tone was sad and hollow. "Go back to your room Mira. In a week's time I'll come for you. I won't be able to resist the thirst much longer. Prepare yourself for it." Then he was gone.

That night and through the next day Mira thought back to the first lessons she was taught. The lessons in the beginning spoke of the great warrior who came to the druids. He was a good man. *So this is what happens when a good man is turned into something that people believe to be inherently evil*, she thought. *He must truly despise himself. All he really wants is someone to care for him. It's hard to believe that he hasn't gone insane.* Mira paused a moment in her thoughts. *Or maybe he has a little. At the very least, he's hurt and angry.*

It took Mira most of the afternoon to reach the decision she finally came to. She soaked in a long bath, then put on one of the dresses in the closet that she was particularly fond of. It was a soft green and reminded her of spring. It wasn't one of the

overly fancy ones. In another lifetime she may even have been able to own this dress. It fitted her personality much better than the heavy brocade and beaded gowns that it shared the closet with. She brushed her hair out and pulled it back from her face with some small carved wooden combs. She had never owned jewelry so this seemed as good an occasion as any to wear them.

Mira stood in front of the mirror looking at herself. She decided that under the right light, she may even be considered pretty. She took a deep breath and realized that she was excited. She had been waiting a long time to lose her virginity. In some ways she was a little disappointed that it hadn't happened sooner. She was actually more scared that he wouldn't like her than she was of what else he may do to her. She pushed those thoughts out of her mind and resolutely walked out of the rooms and down the hall.

Mira held the lantern high and stared into the darkness around her. She was familiar enough with where she was going at this point. She noted the sound of her feet on the stone floor and wondered how good his hearing was. She could feel a chill rush through the hall and wondered how cold it had become outside the cave with the changing season. She thought about anything other than what she was doing: how much she missed breeze blowing through trees, her friends who were counting on her to do her duty, the way her feet sounded padding down the hallway, the amount of time and energy it took to build this place.

Before she realized it, she was standing in the room that she had now met him in twice. It was dark as it had been the last time she was here, and he was nowhere to be seen. Mira turned around and walked out the door she came in. Since she thoroughly

looked through this room for a door the last time she was here, she was positive that his rooms were behind one of the other doors in the main hallway.

Mira examined several of the more intricately carved doors she passed on her way to this end of the hall and decided she should start by picking one and looking. She didn't need to go far to reach the first set of doors. One led left and one led right. *Well it's one way or the other. If one doesn't work, I can go the other way.*

Mira walked up to the door on her right, turned the knob and opened it onto another hallway. She sighed. *I absolutely hate that there isn't light anywhere down here.* She couldn't see anything beyond the lantern light, and it didn't go far. Forcing herself forward, she walked into the hall, and the light from the lantern fell on a set of rooms similar to the rooms she was residing in. The only difference being, it was obvious no one had been here in a long time. A fine layer of dust covered everything. The bed wasn't made, a broken door hung on one hinge from the disused closet, and the room generally looked as though someone had gotten up one day, left hurriedly and never returned.

A chill went through her body. *Whatever happened here was a long time ago and nothing to do with me.* She turned and left the room quickly, happy to leave the peculiar scene behind.

Reaching the hall, she pulled the door closed behind herself and immediately moved to the other door. When she heard a door slam somewhere further down the hall, she jumped and turned toward the noise, holding the lantern up over her head. It sounded as though it came from the direction of her rooms. Booted footsteps echoed down the hall coming toward her. They were heavy and fast. Suddenly her resolution

failed her, and she felt the need to hide. She turned the knob on the door and slipped into the room, closing the door softly behind her. After a moment of heart pounding, she thought to put out the lantern. Standing in the dark, staring at the door she came through, Mira could hear the footsteps coming closer.

Turning, frightened, she softly padded down the hall into the main room at the end of the corridor. She was taken aback at what she found. This was what she had been looking for. Rillan ap Tiernay's rooms. There was a large bed, similar to hers. The fire was lit and the few candles about the room were burned nearly completely down, making the shadows dance long across the floor. The room smelled clean, like rain. That's when she noticed a large crevice in the cave wall that led up a shaft. There was a heavy stone and metalwork cover that could be closed over it, presumably during daylight hours. She could smell fresh air wafting down the shaft and rain. It was pitch black, but she knew that if there had been stars that night she would have been able to see them.

"You shouldn't be here." The cold voice made her jump. Mira turned around to see Rillan standing behind her, glaring at her.

She swallowed hard. She had promised herself that she wouldn't let him intimidate or scare her. She was going to offer herself to him. *That's what I was trained for. I belong to him. He's been more than reasonable waiting for me.* "I don't want to wait a week. I've come to you now."

Rillan was amazed at the strength in her voice. He almost believed that she wanted to be there with him. "I'll not argue with that decision, if it's truly what you want. But if we begin this, and you change your mind, I may not be able to stop."

"I don't want you to," she said in that same strong, resolute tone.

He reached out, allowing his fingers to graze the white skin of her neck. She shivered from the chill of his hand. Mira's eyes fluttered closed, and she breathed softly. She felt his fingernails drawing a line from below her chin to the bodice of her dress. They continued around edge line of her bodice, over her breasts, then back up the other side of her neck, until his hand was pressed against her hairline.

I never expected him to be so gentle, Mira thought, as she felt his other hand on the opposite side, turning her around and cupping her face. *He's painted as a bloodthirsty warrior with uncontrollable hunger. The teachings never talk about this side of him.*

Rillan watched Mira. His hands caressed her neck and cheeks. She didn't even flinch. The shiver that he felt against his palm was like that of an excited lover. He expected frightened trembling. He leaned down, his lips only a breath away from kissing her, still not quite trusting her offering, coming as it did on the heels of his ultimatum. Even so, she was soft under his touch, and he was nearly blind with hunger. He couldn't refuse her, not now that she was here. Her breath warmed his lips, and Rillan pulled her to her tiptoes, closing the distance between them, kissing her gently.

The contrast always overwhelms me, he thought. *Their warmth against my cold. Balance.* Mira accepted him, pressing her lips back against his, dragging the moment out endlessly.

When Rillan released Mira from the kiss, she sighed breathless and dazed for a moment. "I wondered how that would feel," she said. "I spent a long time wondering." Her eyes remained closed, and a small flush crept up her chest, beginning above the

bodice of her dress and creeping up her neck to her cheeks. Rillan smiled, remembering her youth and inexperience. He moved his hands down her neck, caressing, pressing palms on her shoulders. Mira felt the movement and held her breath in anticipation. *I'm enjoying this*, she thought, surprised. Finally she opened her eyes and held his dark gaze. "So much I expected has been wrong," she admitted.

"Yes," he replied, simply. With one more sweep of his hands, he pushed the sleeves of her dress off her shoulders and few inches down her arms, exposing more of her chest. One arm slid around her waist and pulled her body to his. He placed the other hand over her heart, to touch the place where her pulse quickened while he kissed her. Warmth spread outward from beneath his fingers. *Her skin is soft as flower petals, and she smells like roses*. Rillan leaned down again, placing small kisses around her jaw line and down her neck.

Mira felt Rillan's kisses like the fluttering of butterflies against her skin. When his hand moved from over her heart, to caress her breast, she gasped. Embarrassment, uncertainty, and excitement flooded her senses. His fingers explored the neckline of her bodice before sliding between the fabric and her flesh. One nipple was caught between the cool, slender digits. Her body responded instinctively to his caress. Her nipple swelled between his fingers, as he squeezed and pinched.

Distracted, Mira almost didn't feel the sharp teeth pierce the soft flesh of her breast. She cried out in surprise and pain, but he couldn't stop. As the pain subsided, she could only feel Rillan's mouth moving against her skin. It was like a long, slow kiss. *Even this is gentle*, she thought, idly, her head beginning to spin. *I wonder what it tastes*

like. Time nearly stopped while he took her blood from her breast. Mira lifted her hands to his head, and her fingers stroked into his hair.

His fingers continued squeezing and twisting her nipple. *It's a strange combination of pain and pleasure. The bite, the pressing lips, his tongue stroking, his fingers pinching.* Mira closed her eyes, concentrating on the lightheaded feeling coming on and the soft suckling noises. She heard soft moans and gasps as well, and it took her a moment to identify that they were coming from her mouth.

When Rillan finally finished feeding and pulled away from her, Mira felt some regret. In a way, his taking from her seemed completely right, at that moment. She was a little dazed. When she felt his lips press against hers, she was surprised at first. Then she found herself wantonly leaning into the kiss. Her hands still in his hair urged him to go farther. She could taste warmth and copper and she realized it was her blood in his mouth.

Rillan straightened, and waited until Mira opened her eyes before speaking. "It's pleasure and pain," he said. "A very potent combination."

Mira agreed with a silent nod, watching in fascination while Rillan licked her fresh blood from his lips. "I don't know what I expected."

"You expected I would rip your pretty dress, and take everything you had to offer. You expected an act of violence. In a week, you might have gotten what you expected." He leaned down to where his teeth punctured her skin and licked around the holes, lapping at the trickle of blood still oozing. Mira shivered in pleasure. Her skin burned where his tongue touched her. "They do you and your sisters a disservice, sending you here unprepared," he said in between strokes of his tongue on her skin.

Mira didn't reply. She couldn't have formed words, even if she wanted to. Besides, he was absolutely right, she had not been prepared for any of this: the darkness of the cave, what he truly was, or how lonely she would feel. She had not been prepared for his gentle touch. She had definitely not been prepared for the arousal she was now feeling. Her arms reached for his neck, wanting to hold him to her breast. Rillan caught the edge of her dress with his fangs and pulled down, freeing both breasts. Sucking in a ragged breath, he took one nipple into his mouth and sucked hard.

Shrugging her arms out of the sleeves, Mira reached for Rillan. Finding the laces to his shirt, she tugged. The knot untied, and a portion of Rillan's chest was exposed to her touch. Tracing a fingertip down the center of his chest, she found the next lace. In her haste, she pulled a little harder than she intended, ripping the fabric of the shirt and popping one of the buttons on his vest. She didn't hear the ripping fabric over the sound of rushing in her ears, like water. All she noticed was that it was easier to remove both the shirt and vest at the same time, pushing them down around his arms.

Rillan raised his arms to circle her waist, not realizing that she hadn't quite finished with his shirt. His muscles flexed and this time the sound of ripping material was too loud for either of them to ignore. For a moment, they both stopped, a little surprised. Rillan released her nipple from his lips, looking down at his shredded shirt and bare chest. "You're stronger than you look, girl," he said, smiling and forgetting himself for the first time in ages. He actually laughed. It rang through the cavern, and echoed in Mira's ears. The terrible intensity constant in his expression, broke with that laugh, and she couldn't help smiling along with him.

“Lord Tiernay, are you mocking me,” Mira asked, coyly pushing her lips down into a frown.

Rillan licked his lips and grinned at her. A day ago, the sight of his fangs bared like that would have scared Mira almost to the point of running from him and her duty. But now, she grinned back, laughing with him, as he shifted his weight to sweep her into his arms and swing her around to the bed. He laid her down gently, and pulled her dress completely off her body. He took only the care needed to make sure the dress didn't tear as he removed it, then tossed it away into a corner. He finished undressing himself, and Mira closed her eyes and waited, not exactly comfortable, but not frightened anymore.

She could almost feel his gaze on her skin. He watched her chest rise and fall, listening to the shallow breath. Rillan still hungered for her blood, but he wanted to taste the rest of her first. He knelt at the edge of the bed, and spread Mira's legs apart. Bringing his face close to her foot, he licked the heel. Mira felt his tongue tickle her insole, and gasped when the cold of his mouth engulfed her big toe. He sucked and licked that toe, then the other four before dragging his tongue up the inside of her calf, dipped into the crook of her knee, and along the inside of her thigh. Rillan stopped just short of her sex, and moved to her other leg, again starting at the toes and teasing his tongue up Mira's thigh.

Rillan stared at the pink folds, raising his hand to spread the lips. With one finger, he barely stroked the nub at the top of the long slit, causing Mira's body to writhe. Her fingers clutched the blankets in anticipation. Rillan trailed his tongue along the inside of her thigh and down into the dip beside her sex. He listened to her moan hungrily,

working his way with agonizingly slow strokes closer and closer to her center. He took his time licking her outer lips and dipping into the valley beside the soft folds of her vulva. Her clit protruded proudly from its little hood and quivered, begging him to suck on it.

Rillan delighted in the sounds of her pleasure. There was something about being capable of pleasing her that made him feel less of the beast he believed himself to be. Each time his tongue touched her gently, a needy moan erupted from her lips. He wasn't even sure she realized that she was making the sounds, but he never wanted her to stop.

Her sex dripped with desire. Finally Rillan gave in and let himself taste her. His tongue dipped deftly between the soft pink folds. In one long stroke from her core to her clit, she came for him. Rillan watched Mira's body tremble and her breath catch in her chest. He sat up to stare at her face and reached down to tease her swollen clit while she convulsed, back arching up off the bed and hands gripping the blankets.

When the waves of pleasure subsided, she stared up at him in awe. She never dared imagine that he could be like this. At the same time, the smile he returned appeared so superficial.

Rillan wanted more. As Mira read the further intent on his face, she blushed a bit under his gaze. Seeming so sweet, innocent, and willing, Mira nearly made him forget where and what he was. Rillan reminded himself that the minute she saw the other side of him she would beg for death as all the others did. He had given up thinking that the next girl would be different, a long time ago. *Enjoy this moment*, he said to himself. *She believes she can save you right now. Let her, enjoy her.*

The abyssal emptiness Mira saw looking into his eyes was almost more frightening than his fangs. Desperately, Mira wanted to do something to change it. She reached up to touch his face, and he closed his eyes, leaning into her hand. Then his hand came up to the back of hers. "Make me feel like that again," she asked timidly.

The smile returned to his lips, and he turned to her hand, kissing her palm, before pushing her back down on the bed and whispering, "As you wish."

Rillan knelt between her legs and took his hard cock in hand. He groaned, holding himself back, as he squeezed the shaft and stroked the head up and down her slit. He watched her watching him, eyes wide with uncertainty. Lining his cock up with her virgin entrance, he pressed himself tentatively against her, waiting for her reaction. Mira's body stilled, and she whimpered. Closing her eyes, she gripped the bed sheets and braced herself for his next movement.

Taking a deep breath, Rillan forced himself past her maidenhead and into her body. She gasped, and her face contorted with uncertainty and discomfort. "Relax," he said gently and stroked her hair from her brow. He held himself over her, half his length inside her and waited for the fluttering walls of her sex to calm and adjust before pushing the rest of the way in.

Mira moaned as the burning pain subsided, and she felt him completely sheath himself in her pussy. His hand reached between them, and his fingers began to dance on her clit. As pleasure began to seep through her once again, she reached up for Rillan. To his surprise, she pulled him to her and began kissing and nibbling at his lips. When her hips moved beneath him, Rillan pulled his hand away and began to rock against her.

Mira stopped her kisses only to moan her appreciation of the slow gentle strokes he was torturing her with. Rillan took his time making love to her. He gave her whatever she seemed to want, alternating from kissing and suckling on her lips, neck, or breasts. He let her hands guide him over her body, as he thrust into her in an agonizingly slow dance. When she came for him again, he closed his eyes, pulled back from her lips, and pressed deeply into her. As he felt her pussy convulsing around his shaft, his body tightened, and he flooded her with his own release. He held onto the sensation for as long as he could, gently pushing into her a few more times as the last of his cold seed spilled into her.

Breathing heavily, he braced himself on his elbows above her. When they both came back to reality, he looked into her eyes warning her that he wasn't quite done yet. *One more test for my brave little one*, he thought. This part sent more than one completely compliant girl running from his rooms.

Mira watched him uncertainly. The look on his face didn't match the current situation. His touch and manor, so gentle and giving were harsh contrast to his now cruel eyes. Then his face started to change. The handsome warrior distorted, his skin paled and his eyes turned completely black and cold, simultaneously receding into his skull as the skin pulled tight. It was as though she was staring into empty sockets. His fangs grew to fill the whole of his mouth, and teeth which had been normal became daggers slanting in all directions. Mira lay completely still, while the monster she feared from the beginning took form on top of her.

Rillan waited a few moments, allowing her to soak in the harsh reality of his horrific features. When she didn't begin crying or trying to escape, he leaned up on one

arm and pushed her head to the side. The vampire opened his mouth wide, revealing not only two delicate fangs in his mouth, but numerous long, angry knives jutting from where teeth should have been. Rillan leaned down toward her neck, holding her head so that she wouldn't move and cause him to harm her. A tongue much too long for his mouth snaked out and laved along her neck, searching for a pulse. Mira trembled; still her resolve held firm. Rillan was amazed, as he felt her relax beneath him. When he put his mouth over her pulse, she took in a deep breath. He bit down, and a soft whimper escaped her lips. Still she didn't cry out.

Rillan drank to sate his hunger. He tasted her warmth again, and it flooded through his veins. His body reveled in the heat that only came with feeding. Mira lay still, the room spinning around her, and she began to feel very tired. To avoid thinking about the monster drinking her life from her, she concentrated on the feeling of his cock inside of her. The tired drifting feeling was accompanied with a gentle pleasure from where their bodies were joined. Mira moaned at the memory of what he did to her moments before, and she pressed her hips against him, feeling his cock press more deeply inside her, as he continued to drain her body. Eventually darkness settled over her, and she lay still.

Rillan sat back and looked down on her motionless form. She was paler now that he drained her. She slept softly. It was a rare thing, when he considered keeping one of them with him while she slept after the feeding. As he thought about her hips pressing against him while he drank from her, even after she saw his face, there was a little piece of him that wanted to hope.

Anger quickly took over his mind. He was annoyed with himself for letting her get to him. *Mira is as frightened as the others. The girl merely has a more lascivious side to her than the others.* Growling, he got out of the bed and pulled on his breeches. Leaving his tattered shirt on the floor, he went to the corner of the room where he threw her dress and grabbed it. Tossing it across her body, he picked her up off his bed.

I'll have to lock my door in future, in case she goes wandering again, he thought angrily, carrying her to her own rooms. He muttered and fumed the entire way there, not knowing why she had gotten to him so badly. By the time he reached her bed, his temper had cooled somewhat. He laid her down with a reluctant gentleness and stared at her a moment. Rillan put her dress across the arm of a chair nearby, and returned to her side. He carefully pulled the blankets back and covered her, taking the time to brush her hair from her face and arrange her in the bed so that she looked comfortable. He felt like he was looking for excuses to stay near her.

Rillan started to lean down to kiss her cheek. It had been a long time since a girl managed to spend a first night with him without running, no matter what time he spent preparing them for it. Suddenly anger hit him again, and he pulled himself away. He stormed from her rooms, slamming doors behind him. *Give her time. She'll be like all the rest,* he told himself.

When Rillan reached his own room, he threw the covering of the shaft closed. Dawn was approaching, he could feel it. He couldn't believe how much time he kept her here. Crawling into his bed, he smelled her on his sheets. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, allowing the nightmares to come for him as they always did.

Chapter 3

Lilith gazed around the room at all the druids present. “So what do you propose, should the rumors be true?”

One of the younger men looked at the old woman with concern. “Can we survive without him?” He cleared his throat nervously, knowing how many of the others would feel about the idea he was about to propose. “It has to be said. I mean, if Tiberius knows about the vampire, would we be safer to get rid of him? Before he’s found that is.”

A fearful murmur ran through the assembled crowd. Many of them had been thinking it. No one was willing to say it.

A young woman stood indignantly forward. “We keep him for our own purposes for centuries only to discard him when it seems things may become difficult?” She glared at the druids who seemed to be agreeing with the idea. “I can’t believe we could be as callous as those he was created to protect us from. There must be another way.”

An angry looking young man standing against the back wall stepped forward. “If there is another way,” Liam ap Arnauk growled, “shouldn’t that have been decided before we sent in the new sacrifice? And if there isn’t another way, then we’ve sent a girl to her death for no reason. If we’re going to be rid of the vampire, then we should have come to that decision weeks ago.”

“Enough Liam.” An old man said. He was one of the few assembled who was sitting. The mere movement stilled the commotion that had resulted from the controversial conversation. “Rillan ap Tiernay was created to be our guardian. Should the legends left by those who actually saw and spoke to him be true, then it can be

believed that he would take his own life to protect us should the situation demand it. While I am hesitant to think that it has come to such an extreme, the possibility should be considered. Though I would urge that if his extermination is to be considered, he be involved in the meeting which should determine that. And more importantly, it needs to be established that the option is necessary. Must I remind you all that once he is gone there can be no other? That information has long since been destroyed.” The other elders shifted uncomfortably, knowing that he was lying for the sake of the young men and women attending this meeting. “And the decision to create him was a long and difficult one. A life is not something to be manipulated lightly. This must be a unanimous decision.”

Lilith nodded. “Thank you Caleb. Your words are always thought provoking. It has been a long time since direct contact with Lord Tiernay has been considered. Eva?” A middle aged woman with long brown braids stood forward. “Make arrangements for a meeting to be held with Lord Tiernay, should it be deemed necessary. For now, I believe we all need to wait for our contact to return. It doesn’t need to be said, so forgive the reminder. All things said here must remain here.” *At least if Darius is spying on us and working for the empire, he won’t like the information he would have gleaned from this meeting,* Lilith thought. She didn’t like lying to her own people.

With a series of nods, a majority of the assemblage filtered out of the room, leaving only a handful of gray and white haired men and women behind. The elders remained in conference for most of the evening, coming to no more conclusive decisions than had been gleaned in the afternoon debate.

Black spun and swayed drunkenly in Mira's head, as she woke. She groaned, feeling the nausea and dizziness twist her stomach. When she opened her eyes, she found herself in complete darkness. The fire had gone out in the hearth. *How long have I been asleep*, she wondered.

At first she didn't remember where she was. The bed was warm and the bedding was silky. *This isn't my bed, is it?* Suddenly her stomach heaved. When she tried to lean over the edge of the bed to vomit, her muscles didn't want to obey the urgent command. As she began to retch, she found the strength to turn over just in time to lose the bile in her stomach down the side of the silky bed sheets and all over the floor.

Mira groaned as she continued to convulse and nothing came out. The bile she lost smelled foul, and tears came to her eyes, as pain joined the weakness in her muscles all over her body. She had never felt so sick in her life. Her head screamed its upset at her for having moved at all, searing down her neck and shoulders and back to mingle with the sore tired pain that started in her legs and moved up her chest.

With more effort than it should have taken, she managed to work herself onto her back at an angle in the bed. At least her head wasn't dangling over the vile smell that the bile vomit emanated from the side of the bed. Confusion and fear spread through the sick and pain. *Where am I?* Her brain didn't want to think. It hurt too badly.

Suddenly she realized what brought her from the bliss of unconsciousness into nightmare reality. She needed to use the chamber pot. She racked her brain to try and remember where in the black it might be. As she tried desperately to remember, flashes of where she was and what had happened to her began to blaze across her

vision in blinding clarity. Her hand reached unsteadily downward to find the hair on her mound matted and crusted to her body with his dried cum. Mira withdrew her hand, as if it were on fire.

Butterflies joined the nausea in Mira's stomach and stirred it to the point that she began to heave again. Grateful for her empty stomach, she felt her jaw extend, her throat contract, and her muscles jerk painfully. There was no way she could roll over again. If there had been anything in her, it would now have been on her. But now her bowels were complaining more violently. It was all she could do to keep from peeing the bed. More tears squeezed out from under her eyelids.

Mira threw the blankets off to the side of the bed. Determination boiled in her as she forced herself to sit up. Whimpering with each movement, she lifted one leg and then the other off the edge of the bed. She sat there a moment, breathing heavily and gathering her strength as she tried to judge the distance to the chamber pot in her mind. She could picture it under the small stand, against the far wall, fifteen or maybe twenty feet from where she was. *It's not that far*, Mira reassured herself.

A gurgling in her stomach urged her to move. Mira scooted forward until her feet touched the carpeted stone floor. The room was starting to spin again. Mira took a deep breath and tried to stand. For a moment, she actually believed she was going to manage to get to her goal. Without warning her legs gave out as they felt her weight. Mira cried out, tumbling to the floor. Grabbing for support, she only managed to topple the small stand next to her bed. There was a loud crash, when the porcelain pitcher from the stand hit the stone floor.

Mira heard more than felt the sickening thud, as her head hit the floor. Pain screamed through her skull. A monstrous image of a pale skinned creature with empty eye sockets and a mouthful of fangs consumed her. Grateful relief soothed her, as Mira felt liquid warmth puddle and flow over her thighs, and she began to black out.

* * * *

Rillan's sword sung out of tune, slicing through the air and crashing violently against the armor on the practice dummy. His strikes were a bit off this day. He hadn't slept, and he kept looking at the large wooden double doors, expecting them to open. Every random sound had him checking to see if she had woken up yet. He wasn't sure if she was weaker than the others, if he drained her more than he should have while he was trying to teach her his lesson, or if she was hiding in her chambers afraid of him. He swung the sword angrily at that thought and dented the already battered shield again. The last was the most likely of the options. They didn't usually sleep this long. *It's her own fault*, he told himself over and over as he swung his weapon haphazardly.

He considered going to check on her. That pissed him off more. *Why, the hell, do I care*, he thought and brought the sword down on the dummy hard enough to crack the breast plate strapped to what should have been its chest. He swore and threw the sword down. It clattered across the floor and lodged against the hearth of the large fireplace.

Rillan pulled his armor off piece by piece and tossed it at the foot of the dummy. Several times, he started for the door and then paced back to the dummy indecisively. Taking a couple deep breaths, Rillan went over to pick up his sword. He sheathed it properly and hung it with care on the armor rack next to the dummy, picked up his

armor and set it where it belonged. The actions were therapeutic, in a way. Once he calmed down, he left the practice room, his soft boots echoing footsteps on the stone down the hallway. When he reached her door, he paused and tucked in his white shirt. He was sweaty and considered changing first, but then shook his head and forced himself to go in and check on her.

The darkness in the hall was unsettling. She never let the candles burn down this low. That was when he realized that she wasn't merely hiding from him. Something was actually wrong. His pace quickened, as he walked to her bedchamber, almost starting to run when he neared the door. Opening the door, the reek of vomit and urine assailed his senses. He could see the empty bed from the doorway. With his hand over his nose, he rushed into the room. The guilt he had been hiding beneath a blanket of anger bubbled to the surface, when he found her lying naked and hurt on the floor near her bed.

Rillan knelt next to her and reached down to push her hair back from her face. "I'm sorry little one. I took it too far," he said softly. Gently he picked her up and placed her on the bed. Her body was stone cold. He felt his heart sink into a sick fear. Leaning down he placed his ear against her chest and listened for a heartbeat. He had never accidentally killed anyone. The second it took for the weak thud to tap against her chest seemed an eternity. Letting the air out of his lungs, he listened for a moment, before standing up and looking around the room.

The carpets would have to go and the bedding would need changed. The pitcher and night stand would need replacing. He glanced down at Mira. First he would get her cleaned up and warm though. Rillan tucked the blankets around her, so that she might

warm up a bit while he worked in the small chamber that held the bathing tub. He moved quickly, lighting the coals under the tub. He was glad that he had replaced the water the day after he fed from her, so that it would be clean when she woke. As he waited for the water to warm, he pulled the rugs up from either side of the bed and dragged them out into the hallway. Then he went back into the room and tried to think of where he could get another rug to cover the cold stone floor, while he cleaned up the shards of porcelain from the broken pitcher and stood the night stand up.

There was one room that had rugs in it which weren't being used. He looked over at Mira again and made the decision. Elizabeth was long dead. She wouldn't miss the few items. The rugs would need to be beaten to drive the dust from them. He would take care of that after he cleaned her up and returned her to bed.

Rillan lit the fireplace and candles around the room. That way, if she woke while he was there, she would be able to see, and he may not frighten her as badly. He still didn't know how she would react when she regained consciousness. Though at this point, he wasn't quite as inclined to blame her if she was frightened of him. He knew full well how much pain and weakness accompanied a sleep this deep for this long. He had rarely taken the first feeding this far, save on the few occasions that the girls took too long to come around.

Rillan checked the bath water, finding it warm enough, he returned to her bedside and lifted her carefully into his arms. He carried her cold body to the water and lowered her into the tub, ignoring the water that splashed over the edge and soaked his shirt and pants. He propped her securely in the tub and left her to warm up while he pulled the blankets and sheets from the bed and replaced them with clean ones.

Mira was still unconscious, when he returned to her. Rillan sighed and picked up the rose scented soap he left for her last week. He rubbed the soap in a soft cloth, then held her with one arm while he gently ran the cloth over her back and arms. He leaned her back against the tub again and stroked the soapy cloth over her breasts, smiling when she took in a deep breath as if she were enjoying what he was doing. His hand seemed to lose the cloth momentarily, as he dipped beneath the water to clean her sex. Rillan cradled her with one arm, while the fingers of the opposite hand combed through the hair covering her mound and then caressed the folds of her pussy. He couldn't help remembering how she tasted. Mira moaned softly, and he turned his eyes on her face to see if she was awake, but there was nothing.

Rillan sighed again and pulled his hand from her body. The part of his mind that told him he shouldn't be molesting an unconscious woman was winning out over the part of his mind that told him she belonged to him and he could do as he liked with her. He washed her hair, and found the bump that told him exactly how hard she hit her head when she fell. He growled at himself for not having checked on her sooner and carefully rinsed the soap from her hair.

Rillan grabbed a towel from the chair near the tub. Lifting her, he wrapped her in the soft material before carrying her back to her bed. He found a soft white shift from the chest at the foot of her bed and dressed her. Laying her back on her pillows, he pulled the blankets over her, and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Lastly, he went to her store room with the larder and found some dried meat and vegetables. Taking them back to the fire, he pulled the small pot from the brackets and filled it with the ingredients. Rillan wasn't a great cook, but he knew that she would

need to eat when she woke up. He placed the pot back on the brackets and swung it into the fire.

With a last look over at the angel lying in the bed, Rillan decided he would go change out of his wet clothes, get himself cleaned up, and then come back to check on her before he got some sleep. The worst was over. The more she slept, the better she would feel. That thought didn't stop him from feeling guilty for what he did. He knew very well that it didn't have to go that far. He was frustrated by Mira and was trying to scare her. Obviously it backfired. *Or maybe it didn't. When she wakes, she may very well be terrified of the monster that hurt her. At least this time I know that I can't blame anyone except myself for it. To some extent, he thought, it might be better that way. Fear is what I'm used to. This one is getting to me far too much.*

* * * *

Mira rolled onto her side and pulled a pillow to her chest, cuddling down into the soft silky blankets. Slowly, she started to remember the last time she was awake. The room smelled of stew or soup or something good. Her stomach growled. Mira opened her eyes and stretched, wondering if it had all been a dream. She still felt sore, but it was nothing like what she remembered.

A dull ache throbbed in Mira's skull. Sitting up, she lifted her hand to the side of her head, where she found a tender knot the size of a small egg. *Proof that it wasn't a dream. At least my legs are working this time,* she thought, and inched to the edge of the bed. It didn't take near the effort that it had before. She noticed that her robe was across the foot of the bed, and she pulled it on over a shift she didn't remember putting on. Looking around the room, she saw that her rugs were gone, and her pitcher was

different. *He must have come in and cleaned everything up while I was unconscious,* she thought uncertainly.

Mira made her way over to the fire, found a bowl and spoon, and carefully scooped some of the meaty broth out of the pot. The stones were cold under her feet and sent a chill through her. *I wonder if he'll replace the rugs. They made a big difference.* She sat down in the chair at the small table in her room and ate slowly. It wasn't great stew, but she instantly felt better as it filled her empty stomach.

Rillan watched from the shadows, as Mira got up and made herself a bowl of stew. She was obviously unsteady, but relief coursed through him, with the certainty that she would be okay. He slunk into the darkness and quietly opened her storeroom, removed a loaf of bread and some cheese, then crept back. She was sitting with her eyes closed, chewing a small bite of stew. *Her head must still hurt,* he thought.

Indecision halted his steps. He didn't want to upset her, but he wanted to know how she was going to be with him now. He could wait until she came looking for him again, but his guilty conscience would gnaw at him until he apologized. He growled at himself. He would feel even worse, if he went in to talk to her and only made her upset in addition to having made her sick. Finally, he began to annoy himself again. *When did I stop being a man with women,* he asked himself in frustration. He strode into the room and cleared his throat, so that she would hear him coming.

Mira jumped at the sudden strange noise assaulting her ears over the sound of the crackling fire. Rillan flinched, when she reacted to his approach with fear. He was already anticipating her screaming, when she looked at him. To his surprise, when Mira

turned, and her eyes met his, she gave him a solid glare, which spoke of any number of emotions, none having anything to do with fear.

“A gentleman knocks to announce his presence. I don’t appreciate being snuck up on, Lord Tiernay,” Mira said, in a quiet, but authoritative tone reflective of her pounding headache.

Rillan couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face at the glare and reprimand.

“I’m glad you find it amusing,” she growled angrily and went back to her stew.

Rillan sat the bread and cheese on the table in front of her. “Do you want some tea,” he suggested. Without waiting for an answer, he went over to the fire, poured some water from the new pitcher into the cast iron kettle and placed it in the fire.

Mira broke a piece of the bread off of the loaf and dipped it in the stew broth. She chewed slowly, ignoring Rillan, as he produced two mugs for the tea and a tea pot. He seemed to know her room almost better than she did.

He cleared his throat again. “Are you feeling better?” Rillan squatted down near the fire and used the poker to move the logs about.

Mira finished chewing and swallowed. “A little.” There was another long silence, while Mira watched him play in the fire. She thought about some of her friends and how the guys always liked to mess with the fire. She wondered if it was male nature to be drawn to the flames. “My head hurts pretty badly,” she said, in a nervous sounding voice.

Rillan stood up and looked at her. He stared into her eyes intently, as if he was trying to look inside her. The intensity caused Mira to turn her attention back to the mostly empty stew bowl.

“Here.” he said and produced a small pouch of herbs from one of his pockets. “This should help.”

Mira opened the pouch and looked inside. She recognized a number of the herbs and nodded. She figured that she could add some of it to her tea. “Thank you,” she said, and then there was more silence. She really didn’t know how to act. She kept seeing flashes of what happened go through her mind. Mira accepted that this was her life now. Whatever he was, and whatever he was going to do, she would have to either live with it or ask him to kill her. She was beginning to understand why the others chose death.

“You’re thinking very hard,” Rillan said.

Mira looked up and saw the concern on his face. “I guess I am.”

Rillan nodded, poured the tea, and came over to the table. He plucked the bag of herbs up and put a few pinches into her cup before handing it to her. “May I ask what’s making your brow furrow so deeply?”

Mira could almost feel the resignation and concern weighted in the words. “I’m not ready to die yet, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Rillan’s eyes bored into her. “Good.”

They sat in silence some more. Neither of them knew what was supposed to come next. Rillan was getting frustrated again. Now he knew she was alright and

wasn't going to volunteer to be put out on the slab in front of his cave, his mind was reverting to safer feelings. Anger was the one he felt most comfortable with.

When Rillan started tapping his fingers impatiently, Mira broke the silence again. "Will it always be like that," she asked softly.

Rillan's tone was harsher than he intended. "How long have you been sitting there stewing to ask me that?"

"I'm not trying to insult you," she replied defensively.

Rillan stood up and paced away from her. "No, it shouldn't always be like that." He knew that she didn't realize it was his fault, and he didn't want to admit to it. If she didn't hate him now, he figured she would the minute she realized that he had been playing games and risked her life trying to make a point. He waited for her to ask why it had been so bad that time, but the question never came.

"I'm tired," Mira said finally. She didn't want to sit there with her aching head and watch him fume. She didn't even know what she said that was so terrible, and she didn't feel like figuring it out. "Do you mind if I go to sleep now?"

Rillan glared at her. *Is she actually dismissing me?* He growled. "Fine. I'll be back to check on you in a few hours."

Mira nodded. *I don't plan on being awake in a few hours,* she thought. If agreeing would make him go away, she would do whatever she needed to.

His boots could be heard retreating down the hall, followed by a slamming door. Mira put her hand to her aching head. "He could of at least closed it without so much noise."

Mira didn't bother to pick up the dishes or the food. She wanted to be asleep again. Pulling the blankets back, Mira dropped her robe across the foot the bed, and climbed into the cool silky sheets. She sunk down into the soft bedding and was asleep almost instantly.

* * * *

Rillan checked on Mira several times, over the next few days. She remained asleep. His paranoia getting to him, Rillan started to wonder if she was sleeping so much because of what happened or if she was avoiding him. In order to take up time while he waited for her to wake, he started to pull the rugs up from the floor in Elizabeth's rooms, so that he could put them down in Mira's rooms. He was reluctant to enter the dust covered hall. *There are so many ghostly memories hidden behind those doors.*

Rillan stared at the rugs on the floor. *It might actually be easier to clean the mess off of Mira's rugs,* he thought wryly. He looked over the layer of dust and tried to guesstimate how many times he would have to beat the damn things to knock the time from them, versus how much water and soap it would take to clean the bile and urine off the others. He smiled to himself. *I can just imagine what the druids would think, if I left them outside with a note asking them to be cleaned.*

Glancing around the room, Rillan's eye lingered on a waded up dress at the foot of the disused wardrobe. He realized that he actually remembered the last time he saw Elizabeth wearing it. Suddenly sadness descended on him like a tidal wave. He looked up and ran his eyes over all the things in the room. He couldn't take Elizabeth's rugs

out of here. They belonged here. Leaving the room, he closed the door quietly, wishing he had never gone back in there, and went to find the soiled rugs to clean them.

Mira lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling. She hadn't left the bed, except to eat and use the chamber pot. A couple times, she heard her door open. She would lay still and keep her eyes closed. She didn't think he ever came all the way into the room. As far as she could tell, he looked in and left again. Mira wasn't really sure why he kept coming back. *I hope he's not still hungry. I don't think I could handle it again already.*

The tired feeling finally left her, and Mira was becoming restless. She memorized every crevice in the ceiling. It was the only part of the room that looked like cave. What she really wanted was to see the stars, her friends, grass, rain, birds, and so many other things. She thought back to the shaft that she saw in Rillan's room. *It must be the only view of the sky in these caves.* She was starting to really feel the loneliness here. It was one of the things that made her feel bad for Rillan. Mira had always been very logical. She knew, no matter how lonely she might feel, Rillan had been dealing with this awful place a lot longer.

The sigh escaping her lips almost startled her. Mira didn't even realize how long it had been since she last said something. Even the sound of a sigh seemed loud and inappropriate. *By all the Gods I can't live like this,* she thought. *I need to see the sky and to feel the breeze and the rain. I need to speak and sing. I need someone.* Tears started to form in her eyes.

Throwing the blankets back, Mira sat on the edge of the bed. She braced herself for the jolting cold of the stone floor beneath her feet. The chill that ran through her was

exceedingly unpleasant after she spent so much time in her nice warm bed. Throwing open her closet doors, she found a simple dress and pulled it on. Then she slid her feet into a soft pair of shoes, deciding to leave them near the bed in the future. *Maybe I can ask Rillan to get me some slippers, if he'll even talk with me.*

Mira found herself thinking that she may be wrong. At first she believed Rillan wanted girls around because he was lonely and wanted a friend as well as food. The more he growled and glared, the more Mira found herself doubting that original conclusion. He was mean and unpleasant no matter what she said.

She forced herself to stop thinking about Rillan. What she wanted most right now was to see the sky, and the only place she knew where she could do that was his room. As she walked down the hall toward his rooms, her brain was working on an excuse, in case he found her there. She held the lantern high in the air, sending light scorching down the dark hallway. Mira started by checking the main room at the end of the hall where she found him before. Finding the room empty and cold, she figured that he hadn't been there in some time.

Mira crept around, opening doors and looking for him. Every room was dark, and there was no sign of Rillan. A sick feeling started in the pit of her stomach. *What if he was sent on an assignment? He made such a fuss about how bad he can be when he gets back from assignment. I don't know if I want to find out how much worse it can be already.*

Trying to stop herself from thinking about what terrifying, painful thing he might do, she continued looking for Rillan in the rooms off the main hall. Once she established he wasn't anywhere nearby, she snuck down the hall to his door.

Reaching out, she grabbed the handle and started to turn. A noise down the hall made her jump, and she held the lantern up to see if it was him. An image of a gaunt, pale, beast with black cold eyes returning from an assassination or some other evil assignment flashed through her imagination, and she instantly felt eyes on her back. Mira held the lantern up higher and spun around peering in all directions at the darkness. The idea of returning to her room and going back to hiding under her blankets was becoming more tempting.

Just then, a soft breeze wafted from beneath the door, as if it was calling to her. It had been so long since she felt anything save the still and dark of this place. With a new resolve, Mira turned the handle and pushed the door open. The hall was completely black, not even a dim light speaking of a fire in the hearth. She crept down the hall. Another noise had her turning and holding up the lantern again. Her heart was thudding in her chest so loud that Mira feared he would hear it. Suddenly it occurred to her, *he might be in bed asleep.*

The lantern light began to waver, as Mira started to tremble. *Why am I so scared? What's he going to do? Bite me? He's already done that. I survived.* Her brain was working too hard. Mira resolved to leave the lantern on the floor and go the rest of the way with just the light it was throwing. She could see his open bedroom door. The lantern gave off enough barely light. *I'll get inside and decide what to do then. I only want to see the stars and feel the breeze on my face. Then I'll leave.*

Glancing behind herself one last time, Mira slunk the rest of the way down the hall. She felt like a little kid trying to sneak a sweet from the jar, knowing she had already been told 'no.'

Carefully, Mira tip toed into Rillan's bedroom. An unexpected flash of light from a square in the ceiling beckoned her. Mira realized it would take an awful lot of wind to blow down the shaft, down the hall, and out from under the door to catch her attention in the hall. *There must be a storm*, she thought excitedly. She almost forgot that Rillan could be in bed asleep, and she eagerly worked her way to the shaft, staring up into the darkness.

Rillan watched her walk down the hall opening doors and sneaking about. *What is my brave one up to?*

He had taken the rugs to the cave entrance with the intention of leaving them where they could get air and dry. However, a threatening thunderstorm made him think better of the idea. After piling the rugs haphazardly inside the entrance of the cave, he stared into the sky for some time. Warm, humid air stuck in his lungs, as he breathed in the night. Once he thought he would grow used to being in the crypt he called his home. It took time, but he eventually realized that his desire to sleep beneath stars would never be abated.

When Mira neared his door with the obvious intention of going inside, Rillan nearly stopped her. Tension held him in the shadows, as he tried to remember whether or not he locked his door when he left. Then she disappeared into his hall.

He cursed under his breath and followed her. *If she's looking for you, shouldn't you be pleased*, he said to himself. The emotional torrent that had been plaguing him since her first defiant stare began tugging at his mind. *I told her not to be in my rooms*, he growled to himself.

The indecision of how to respond to her blatant disregard for what he told her, and the desire to know what exactly she was up to, kept him in the shadows. He was partially amused by her attempts to see if she was being followed. He even made some noises to scare her off. He figured that if she thought she was being watched, she might run back to her room. Fear flushed her face. Rillan was very familiar with fear. Still, Mira continued on her purpose. First came, the soft feelings of admiration for her determination and ability to continue in the face of being frightened. Then came the anger for the fact that she should be listening to him, and she wasn't.

Rillan snuck into his own bedroom to see what Mira was up to. He expected her to call out or to check his bed. *Does she really think she's sneaky and clever enough that she would be able to do this unnoticed? Does the fool girl have no respect for what I am or what I could do to her?* The soft feeling hit him in the stomach again. *She really doesn't think I would hurt her. That's what makes her so brave.*

Mira stood under the shaft, staring up into the darkness. Flashes of light streaked across the sky and were followed by a strangely muffled crackling. "Even the thunder is strangled down here," she said in a sad whisper, without realizing that she spoke aloud.

Anger and frustration boiled in Rillan again. Such a small comment and yet it stung him deeply. Elizabeth said things similar. *By the Fates, she is so much like Elizabeth.*

There was more muffled thunder, and a trickle of water came down the shaft. It was cold and clear and clean. This was the point where Rillan usually put something

beneath the shaft to catch the water, so that it wouldn't make a tremendous mess on the floor. He almost stepped out of the shadows.

Mira reached her hand up to the water and felt it trickle over her palm and down her arm. She breathed in the fresh clean breeze. Something about the darkness she had been in for all these weeks made her appreciate this experience all the more. Mira stepped under the trickle of water and let it run over her face, down her neck, and across her chest. Goosebumps arose on her skin, as the cold water trailed in rivulets over her flesh.

Rillan hadn't seen beauty like this in so long. The girls usually lost their glow relatively quickly here. He breathed slowly and deliberately, watched the water caress her, and wondered briefly what it would taste like to drink it from her, as it ran along the curve of her breast. He wished she was naked, so that he could watch the water trickle along her stomach and legs as well.

He hated her for making him feel as though he should let her go and not curse her with a life below ground with him. "I thought I told you not to come in here," he growled.

Mira flinched, when she heard his voice. Blood ran cold in her veins, as his deadly tone sunk into her. She didn't need to see him to know that he was furious beyond anything she had yet to experience. "I," she faltered. From somewhere deep inside her, anger wrapped around her fear and bubbled to the surface. *It isn't fair. He keeps the only air in this place for himself. Why is he so mean?* "I just wanted to see the sky. Do you always have to sneak up on me like that? It's obnoxious," she growled right back.

Rillan was taken aback at first. He never, in all his years, dealt with a woman this blatantly defiant and argumentative. He stepped toward her until the light from the lantern fell on him and shadowed his features menacingly. "This is my place. I've never had to punish one of you before, but I'm seriously contemplating it. You have no idea how much your behavior is trying my patience."

Mira flinched again on the word 'punish.' She didn't think there was any way he could devise something more miserable than what already happened. Even so, she did get the impression that he would try. Somehow, though, she couldn't stop her mouth. "My behavior? At least my behavior is consistent. You're the one who seems gentle and caring one minute and then turns into a goon the next. You said I was supposed to be a companion to you, and the druids did me an injustice in their training. Yet you behave companionable one minute and turn into a monster the next, and I'm not referring to the blood drinking. Even that was preferable to the way you're treating me now." Mira was trembling. She didn't know what to expect after her tirade.

"Get out before I bloody my hands with you," he sneered at her.

Mira looked up at the shaft and then back to Rillan with tears in her eyes. "This is the reason they wanted away from you," she said softly, and started to walk past him toward the door.

The comment pushed Rillan over the edge, and he grabbed for her as she tried to pass. Mira dodged the grasp and screamed, then started to run down the hallway. There was nothing save silence following her. As she neared the door, she glanced back to see if he was following. Out of nowhere, he grabbed her by the neck and slammed her back against the wall. Her skull cracked harshly against the stone, and

the wind was knocked out of her lungs. Mira tried to fight the spinning and the lack of air, as he began speaking.

“You bitch. You have no idea what I’ve been to others. What do you want? To go outside? For me to be sweet and kind to you? I’ve gone that route in the past, girl. You beg for one day. Just one. You swear you love me and promise to come back. And as the sun rises above the mountains and I’m trapped in this hell, you would enjoy the feel of the air and the grass and the breeze. You feel the warmth that only the sun can give. Then you come back. You keep your promise. Only now you’re more miserable, because you’ve seen what you’re missing. Then you beg for another day and give more promises. Then a week. Then more. Until you wouldn’t come back at all. And I wouldn’t blame you. Except for the lies you told me. And even those I would eventually forgive and understand. How could you possibly want me over the sun? Then I curse myself a fool for having allowed another woman to creep into my soul, when I already learned that lesson once.” As he spoke his words gradually lost their vehemence, and Mira thought he sounded as though he may cry. “Go back to your room girl. Do not come here again. I promise I won’t be so kind next time. I keep my promises.”

Rillan dropped Mira to the floor and began walking toward his room. Tears streaked down Mira’s face, and a red handprint was already beginning to show signs of bruising on her throat. Mira couldn’t decide if the tears were from what he did to her or from what he said. She walked out the door, knowing better than to push him any farther that night. She had a great deal more thinking to do.

Chapter 4

Mira may have thought it all a disturbing nightmare, if not for the handprint on her throat and the new pain searing through her skull. She stood in front of the mirror and examined the purple seeping into her pale skin. Collapsing onto the edge of her bed, she stared at the door, imagining that she was brave enough to leave. *I can find the way out*, she thought almost manically. *Rillan won't follow me. He'll tell the druids to send someone else. Only, without a withered body lying on the altar outside the cave, everyone will know that I ran away.* That thought triggered tears. *I'm trapped here by myself.*

Mira lay back on the bed, letting tears stream down her cheeks. *I don't know why it's taking so much for me to get used to it all. Didn't they tell me how horrible this was? Wasn't I prepared for being sacrificed for the good of my people?* Mostly, she was angry at herself for seeing something in Rillan ap Tiernay that wasn't really there. *Just because the man's touch was gentle once, and he seemed so-- I was wrong. I was just wrong*, she thought.

It took some time that night, but she was able to turn her tears off. Mira busied herself preparing a bath and making plans for what she could do to pass time until Rillan wanted another meal. *That's all I am. A meal. A well cared for, unwanted, meal. In the end, I suppose, it makes sense. He hates himself. I'm another representation of what he despises about himself. I guess if I were a good person who turned myself into a monster, I wouldn't much like the things that reminded me of that either.*

Mira soaked in the tub, feeling the warm water sooth the tension from her body. She did her best to remember her lessons and try not to be resentful for all of this. It

was her choice. No one forced her into this life. Now she would have to adjust to it. The longer she lasted, the fewer girls in the next generation would have to be subjected to it.

She resolved to look through the library. There were any number of books that caught her attention. *I'd love a better look at those leather bound histories*, she thought with some excitement. *Who knows what kind of old knowledge could be in them. And I can see about finding some books on music.* Nothing surprised her more than when she had found the room with all the stored instruments.

If I can find some books on how to play one of them, she thought, maybe I can teach myself. That would certainly take a great deal of time. Besides, I've never liked sewing, and there is plenty of clothing. I only cook and clean for myself. There are no gardens to tend or animals to look after or children to teach. I have never had so little to do.

Mira eventually got out of the tub, dried herself off, and went to her bed. She wouldn't disobey his rules again.

Rillan grabbed his armor off the rack and strapped it on. Choosing one of the more violent looking maces from the weapons rack, he stepped up to the armored dummy. He roared frustration, as vicious blows rained down on the dummy. Sweat covered his face and ran down the back of his neck, as he battered the inanimate, faceless enemy into submission. When it finally lay in a brutalized mound on the floor, he threw the mace across the room with an unsatisfied war cry and paced away from the mess. Drawing air forcefully into his lungs, he tried to calm down.

“She’s right to some extent,” he said aloud to himself, a habit he studiously developed during long hours of silence. “I’ve shown her no consistency. She has no idea how to behave, because I’ve given her no real direction,” he sighed. He wanted too badly to trust her and walk down the hall to spend time near her. He stared at the large double doors and wondered if he hurt her badly when he slammed her against the wall. “Well if she didn’t fear me before, she’ll be starting to now.”

He couldn’t decide if he wanted her to be afraid and cut off all chance of resurrecting what started between them, or if he wanted her to continue to challenge him. Rillan walked back to his dummy and began to repair the damage he had done, with a skillful hand. This wasn’t the first time, nor would it be the last, that he relieved some of his frustration this way.

Mira could hear the echoing sound of metal on metal, bouncing off the stone walls in the darkness. She worked her way down the hall until she found the door to the library. She was grateful for the yelling and pounding. He sounded angry, and it concerned her. *Still, at least I know where he is and don’t have to spend all my time worrying about whether he’s watching me from the shadows,* she thought.

The library was well organized, and it didn’t take long for her to find the books concerning music. The ones she found were mostly books that discussed music or talked about the history of music. Mira looked around the room with interest and found that there were more history books than anything else. “He must be interested in learning about the things that have happened since he was trapped inside this gloom,” she said softly to herself.

A set of red, leather bound manuscripts caught her attention. Strangely drawn to the books, Mira pulled one of them from the top shelf where it was tucked away. A leather thong wrapped around it held the soft bound manuscript closed. Mira unwrapped it and flipped the cover open. Even with the little training she received in the ancient knowledge and rites, she instantly recognized the intricate instructions. Shocked, Mira didn't know what to think. *The druids would never have written this down. Rillan must have written these.* Mira drew in a sharp breath, and closed the manuscript. *The rites that created him.* She turned page after page, her fingers seemed to burn with each touch. "Immortality," she gasped. *For centuries that rite has thought to have been missing. Have the elders been lying or do they not know that he has this knowledge?* Even her thoughts felt too loud in her head. It was as if even thinking that such things were written down would get her into trouble. Quickly she replaced the manuscript on the shelf where she found it and stared fearfully around, trembling.

Mira tilted her head toward the door and listened to the continued hammering of metal on metal. It was getting louder. She sighed nervously, using the sound to break the uneasy feeling of her situation, and went back to the music books. She found one which looked simple enough. The book mostly contained the history of tin whistles, but there were some pages showing simple tunes and a small section on how to read music notes. Her eyes continued to drift back to the shelf containing the manuscripts.

Mira left a note for Rillan on the desk, letting him know that she borrowed one of the books and which one. As she headed back toward her rooms, silence descended on the hall. A nervous queasy feeling had Mira watching the light around the doors at

the end of the hall, as she quickened her pace toward her own rooms. She wasn't doing anything wrong, but she didn't want him thinking she was up to something either. She didn't intend to ever find out how he would "punish" her, if she stepped out of line again.

The heavy wooden door closed behind her with a thud, and she felt safe again. Excitedly she ran down her hall. She opened the door leading to her music room. It didn't take long for her to turn up a small intricately carved wooden box containing what looked to be a well made tin whistle. It was silver with a soft red cord and tassels on it, tied around the end near the mouth piece. She smiled. *It's very pretty*, she thought, turning it over in her hands. Placing the whistle back in the little wooden box, she picked up the book and the box, before walking out of the music room and down the hall into her bedroom. She placed the box with the whistle on the stand next to her bed and began reading, absorbing everything the book said.

It didn't take long for her to realize she would mostly have to teach herself how to play it. Mira smiled. "I've got all the time in the world," she said to herself.

* * * *

In the beginning, Rillan worried about how she was reacting to what happened between them. It became evident by her behavior, which changed very little, that she was still the same. She was respecting his space, as a result of the attack and staying in her own room. Even so, she was still moving about and doing things to occupy herself. The ones who had given in to the darkness in his home always took to lying in bed and sleeping their tedium away or staring blankly at walls for hours on end. The

ones he pitied were those who didn't lose their minds and lived every day knowing where they were and what he was.

It was a late night, when he walked into his library. There was a tingling in the back of his mind. He wouldn't admit even to himself that he hoped she might come here as well. This way, he could call it a chance encounter in a small space, and neither of them would have to admit to needing the company. Rillan was letting his pride rule him, and he knew it. He refused to go to her and was pissed at himself for having so thoroughly given her the impression that she was not to come to him. "I've no one to blame save myself," he grouched, as he walked the shelves of books and tried to find one that interested him.

A piece of paper, with unfamiliar handwriting, on his desk caught his attention. When he read it a smile cracked his face. *She was here.* The muscles in his cheeks balked at the unfamiliar movement, and his face fell back to the standard frowning position it was used to. Rillan walked out the door and down the hall toward Mira's rooms. His mind was working on some kind of excuse to use for interrupting her solitude. He was curious about why she took the book about whistles.

Standing outside her door and trying to formulate the thing he would say to make it all right that he was visiting, he heard her wobbly attempt at a scale on her whistle. The laughter started as a muffled chuckle and a grin, while he listened to the poor excuse for a scale. Rillan hadn't actually thought someone could do that poorly with a tin whistle. It wasn't as if it was a complex instrument. When she stumbled over another couple notes, he turned away from the door and allowed the bottled amusement out. *She's simply horrible.*

An odd sound from the hallway drew her attention, and Mira put the pretty silver whistle down. If she hadn't believed Rillan ap Tiernay incapable of it, she would have thought the sound to be laughter. She placed the instrument in the crease of the pages of the book and got up to go and see what it could possibly be.

Rillan heard the so-called music stop and stepped quickly back into the shadows down the hall. He didn't want her to be insulted. If his laughing brought her to the door, it would be a great way of getting reacquainted. *Hi Mira, I was passing your door and heard this awful sound from inside. When I realized it was you I broke down into gales of laughter. You'll have to forgive me. I didn't realize you could play,* his brain said to him sarcastically. *Oh that would make her forgive you.*

He watched as her door creaked open, and her beautiful face popped out the crack. At first it was a small look down the hall in both directions. Then she stepped out. Rillan felt as though a vice were being tightened in his chest, as he looked at her. There was a wicked handprint shaped bruise on her throat, but her brown eyes were bright and filled with curiosity, as she looked up and down the hall. Her hair hung in neatly curled waves about her shoulders. The neckline of the dress she was wearing dipped dangerously low. He wanted to slide his arms around her trim waist, pull her into his arms, kiss the bruise and apologize for all of it. The vice tightened a bit more in his chest.

After a thorough inspection of the hall, Mira went back into the room. *That's where I told her to stay, wasn't it?* Rillan stood in the shadows for some time, staring at the closed door. "She doesn't belong down here," he said softly. Then he walked back

to the library, randomly chose a book from a shelf, laid the note she left him carefully on the table, and went to his own rooms. *This one never should have been chosen for me*, he decided, as he closed his own door and disappeared into his dark halls.

* * * *

Rillan had been holding back the hunger for days. His indecision was annoying him again. Over the past couple months, he watched Mira visit the library a couple times, but she mostly remained in her own rooms.

Rillan was pleased. She wasn't wallowing in her own misery, as he tended to do. Still, the small pleasure he took from that was like adding more salt to the wound which had opened in his soul since she arrived. It was constant and nagging. He wanted to be near her, but he couldn't bring himself to believe that she could ever be what she seemed. Then his mind would drift to Elizabeth again, and he would become angry. The continual shifting from sad longing to irate anger had him tired from the inside out. The only real decision he made about the situation was that she at least deserved some amount of consistency in his behavior. So, until he could figure out which way to go, he was keeping his distance. After a great deal of debate, he decided on a solid middle ground for his emotional state and chose to warn her that he would be coming for her again in the near future.

Walking down the hall, he heard it start, softly. The notes were sad and slow. He could almost feel the loneliness in the tune, as it slipped through the cracks in the stone and filled the dark hallway. She had been practicing.

Mira immersed herself in the pages of the books she found on music. It didn't take very long to master the scales, considering she spent all day, every day practicing. She soon found the line in the book which said music was only variations on the scales. It was as though something clicked into place in her mind. Suddenly the music poured out of the little tin whistle.

First she tried playing happy songs and imitating the ones she heard at solstice or in the market. She remembered songs played by old men with beards, accompanied by fiddles and sometimes dancers. Unfortunately, the happiness needed for playing those was simply not in her. The soft lullabies she remembered from her childhood followed, and from there she began playing with the notes on her own. The songs that she found herself playing were low and slow. They started from inside her chest and flowed out the tin whistle, causing the candlelight to dance the shadows around her in time with the soft sounds. She had no idea how far the stone walls of the cave carried the music.

Rillan stood outside her doorway listening and breathing. He closed his eyes and let the sound pass over him. Even as sad as it was, the music was beautiful. *How could something that comes from her be anything but beautiful*, he thought. After a few moments, he finally knocked loudly on the door. The abrupt stop to the music was almost painful. He knocked again.

Mira wasn't sure she heard right at first. It had been so long since noise came from anything other than herself. When the knock came again, she set down the whistle and leaned over the edge of her bed to look down her hallway at the main door so far away. Uncertainly she called, "Come in."

Rillan didn't know if the tone in her voice was fear of letting him in or confusion for his presence. He opened the door and walked down the hall, not realizing how much the music softened his features.

Mira stood as Rillan approached and watched him coming toward her. He noticed that she looked concerned, but not upset. The bruise their last encounter left her with was completely gone. His dark blue eyes met her soft brown, and he almost looked away. It was still strange and unsettling to him. After all this time and the realization that he was unlikely to break her spirit, even if he tried, her strength still baffled him.

Rillan cleared his throat, as he realized he was staring at her. "Why don't you play something happy," he asked to break the silence.

"I've tried," she said softly. "Those don't seem to come out right. I need more practice. Is that why you're here? I didn't realize you could hear it outside my rooms," she blushed, as she realized he could have been listening all this time. "I'm not very good. I can close more doors and play more quietly," she said quickly.

The blush across her chest was a tempting target for him. Though Rillan was sorry he had embarrassed her, he took great pleasure in the sweet way she reacted. "No. That's not why I came. And I enjoyed listening. I wouldn't want you to stop. It's a much more pleasant sound than silence. There has been too much of that of late," he sighed.

Even as he spoke, he could hear her heartbeat and almost see the pulse of blood running through her warm body. Rillan closed his eyes, and he could smell the

rose scented water of her bath, mixed with her own scent on her skin. Mira watched his eyes open, and the black of his pupils bled tellingly into the dark blue irises, and then out into the white until his eyes were solid black in their sockets, giving his face the demon appearance that sent chills over her skin.

“You’re hungry,” she breathed.

Rillan watched her hug herself, as she said it. The movement was subconscious and spoke volumes of her total lack of desire to experience that again. Even so, neither her gaze nor her voice wavered at the certainty of the statement. She was amazing to him. Smart enough to know that it was not something she wanted to do, but she accepted it and was sensibly afraid of it. She gave the appearance of someone facing down an approaching storm and knowing there was nowhere to run. He nodded.

“Now,” she asked in a quiet but certain tone.

“Soon,” he said. “But it doesn’t have to be now. I’ve only come to warn you.”

Mira’s eyes shifted to the walls and then the ceiling. “Last time you said it would be worse the longer you waited, and when I came to you it was still not so bad as it could have been.”

Rillan nodded at the statement. She was weighing her choices with a logic he admired.

“How bad has it gotten now? I mean in comparison to what it was last time,” she asked with concern.

He sighed heavily. Rillan had yet to admit to her that he took it too far the last time, and normally it would never be that bad. “I’m not as far gone as I was,” he replied, trying and failing to sound reassuring.

“Alright,” Mira said haltingly. “I guess if I have any choice in this, then I would prefer that it be done sooner rather than later. I don’t mean to be insulting,” she added quickly. “It’s only... the after effects are not very pleasant.”

Rillan smiled at her phrasing, and the look of distaste that crossed her face. “I’ll be in my rooms. Come to me when you like,” he said. “I take no offense at things that are fact.” With that he turned away from her and walked back down the hall toward the door.

Once he was outside, he stood and waited to see if she would start playing again. After a short time, he heard the song start, low at first and then gaining in volume. For the next few hours, he stood against the wall outside her room and listened to the sad sweet music. It was as though she was singing to him in the darkness and knew the exact notes it would take to reach into him.

Getting herself cleaned up and lighting a lantern to take with her down the hall, Mira wondered what time of day or night it may be. She lost track long ago. There was no way of telling how much time passed, without seeing the sun rise and set.

Mira waited until she was so tired that she was almost falling asleep sitting up. She hoped that if she was tired enough, then she wouldn’t stay conscious as long as she did the last time. As she walked down the hall, she considered asking Rillan for something to tell time with.

Rillan’s door was closed when she reached it, and she knocked loudly, setting the lantern down next to the door. Almost instantly, he called for her to enter. The cold metal latch clicked open, and the door swung slowly. Mira crept down the tunnel toward

Rillan's bedroom. Stepping inside, her eyes instantly went to the closed door over the shaft that led to the sky.

"It's not yet sunset," Rillan said.

Mira flinched at his voice. It wasn't as if she didn't know he was there somewhere, but she hadn't actually noticed him when she entered. He was standing next to his fireplace, staring into the flames. Shadows darkened his features and made him seem more menacing.

"When the sun can no longer reach it, I'll open it. Not before."

Mira nodded quickly, but remained silent. She was very tired and was afraid of how he would react to any continued conversation about the shaft. He didn't seem upset at the moment, even so she wasn't willing to risk it. "I suppose then I should get ready," she suggested and yawned.

Rillan was amazed. Her voice didn't waver a bit. He was strangely pleased by the yawn. In a way, it was a compliment. Generally frightened people don't find time for yawning. "You look tired," he said gently.

Mira blushed. "I suppose a little." Her heart started racing a bit. Would he be angry if he knew she had planned it that way? She was trying to read his face, but the shadows obscured any clue to his mood. "Why do you always keep it so dark?"

Rillan looked around. "I don't need light to see the way you do. Darkness doesn't bother me."

Mira nodded. She knew that. "Well," she started uncertainly.

"Are you truly in such a hurry," he asked. He wasn't sure how to take this.

“Not a hurry exactly, just... I don’t know.” Her eyes fell on the door to the shaft again.

Rillan watched Mira do her best to look everywhere else. *You simply don’t belong down here, beautiful*, he thought sadly. “Mira,” he asked seriously. “Why are you here?”

She looked up at him in confusion. “Because you said—“

“No,” he interrupted. “Why did you choose to be a sacrifice? Why did you choose this life?”

Mira stared at the shadowy figure in front of the fireplace. She didn’t want to answer that. There were too many sad memories there. “Does it matter?”

“Yes,” he responded in an authoritative tone that bit into her. “I need to know why you chose this.”

A long pause filled the space between them, while she tried to find a way around the question. There was no point in lying. The only reason she didn’t want to talk about it was because she didn’t like talking about it. She didn’t think it made a difference. “You killed the man who killed my father.”

Rillan wasn’t sure he wanted to know who or when. If she felt like she owed him something, that could explain a lot. “I do my assignments. I didn’t kill anyone *for you*, Mira.”

She shook her head. “I never said that. I didn’t have anyone left after he died. I volunteered for this because it gave me a purpose.”

“Purpose,” he echoed quietly, and then turned back toward the fire. He could certainly understand that. “Far be it for me to impede someone in their purpose. Take your clothes off Mira.”

He didn’t watch. He listened, as soft swishing sounds told him that she was complying with his order. Rillan had been longing to take her again since that first night. It felt like ages since any woman responded to him the way that she did. Mira found him terrifying when he turned. He had no delusions about that. She forced herself to bottle the fear well enough that she responded to his touch with something other than fear. She would never know how much that meant to him. When the room went silent except for the crackling noise of the fire, Rillan finally turned around.

Mira had her eyes closed. She was waiting for him to descend upon her, fangs protruding from a mouth too large for his face and black coal eyes sunk deep into shadowed sockets. The image in her mind started her heart racing and she waited.

Rillan stepped up to her. Mira’s chest was expanding and contracting with labored breaths and he watched her breasts rise and fall with the effort. He could guess what she was thinking. Leaning in close to her, he breathed in the scent of her hair, his breath on her cheek making her flinch. She hadn’t realized that he was so close.

Mira’s heart pounded in her ears. The vision in her mind grew progressively worse. She imagined his thin pale lips curled back from his fangs, his ears set farther back on his head and his skin almost translucent white pulled tight over his sharply angled cheeks and jaw. His voice startled her.

“I know that your racing pulse has nothing to do with wanting me right now,” he said gently. He reached up and stroked her cheek. “In truth, I’m no better than your

teachers. I gave you a foul impression of me.” He leaned down and lifted a handful of hair to his face. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t have to be like that. I’ve rarely done this Mira, but I’ll give you a choice.”

Mira’s brow had furrowed, and she appeared confused, her eyes still squeezed shut.

“Look at me. I haven’t changed.”

She opened her eyes and found that he was only inches from her. Rillan’s dark blue eyes bored into hers. Mira almost forgot that she was naked until his gaze shifted. She blushed a deep red that only worsened as he smiled. “What,” she asked, as she cleared her throat, desperately wanting something to cool her heated embarrassment.

Rillan’s eyes met hers again, and he reached up to cup one breast in a cold calloused hand. Mira shivered as his frozen digits closed around her soft mound and gently squeezed. He circled her nipple with his thumb and licked his lips, anticipating the feel of the firm nub in his mouth.

“In the past,” he said, and his eyes dropped to the breast he was fondling, “most of the girls who have come here have wanted as little contact with me as possible. So I waited as long as I could, before I went to them. You, however, seem to be capable of dealing with me better than the others have been. So I give you the choice. I need the same amount of blood no matter when I take it. I can either come to you and drain you near death once and a while, or I can come to you and take small amounts more often. You wouldn’t feel the kind of pain and sickness as you did before, but you would have to lie with me more frequently.” As he finished the suggestion, his eyes nervously returned

to hers. He had never wanted to read anyone's thoughts before. She was so strange to him.

"I don't understand why anyone would choose pain and sickness, over time with you." Mira felt his thumb and finger pinch her nipple. This time her racing heartbeat had nothing to do with fear. Mira momentarily lost track of what she had intended to say. "Uh," she looked into his dark blue eyes. "How often would you need to..." Mira's voice trailed off as his other chilled hand began to slide along her hip. He stepped closer, bringing his mouth so near hers that she could feel his breath on her lips.

Rillan smiled as a little whimper involuntarily escaped her mouth. He neglected to tell her that he had been too annoyed with most of the other girls to bother with little pleasantries like this. They were all so frightened of him that it made him feel as though he was raping them. With the others, more often than not, he took their blood and left their bodies alone. He couldn't help himself with Mira though. He almost felt alive when his touch was able to cause her such obvious pleasure.

Rillan nudged her nose with his own, repositioning her face so that he could kiss her, but he only teased her with his lips, coming close and not quite touching her. To his delight, Mira's hands snaked up into his hair, stopping his game and bringing his lips to hers. She felt the strange cold of his skin as her lips pressed against his. Heat flooded into his body from hers. Rillan pressed his tongue along her lips, and she parted them, allowing him to taste her mouth.

He rolled her nipple between his thumb and finger, and a soft moan bled into his mouth, stopping the kiss. Rillan lifted his head and looked down into her eyes, answering her nearly forgotten question. "The more often I feed the less I need to take

and the less sick you will feel from the experience. I leave the choice of timing to you. Come to me when you're willing. But know that if you don't come to me, I will eventually come find you."

Mira nodded, not really caring at this point what the rules were. She only wanted him to keep touching her. She had never known anything like this in her life, and she wished that this part would never end, as much as she hoped the feeding would never come. *Is his touch worth the price of it?*

Her obvious compliance only confused Rillan. He wasn't sure if she was insane, masochistic, or so empathetic that it didn't matter. He couldn't make himself believe the later. In truth, in this moment he didn't care so much about the why. He hadn't been with a compliant woman in so long; whatever her reasons were, they were good enough for the now. Besides, the conversation would serve as a decent reason to spend time with her later.

Cold hands slid across Mira's heated skin, and goose bumps broke out along her flesh. Rillan leaned in to her and closed his eyes. Her hands were on his shoulders, and he pulled her body against his own, reveling in the warmth of her, even through his clothes. Rillan stroked down her back. His fingers danced over the goose bumps, as Mira shivered. Her breath was coming in heavy waves, and her little hands had fisted in his shirt. When he looked to her face again her eyes were closed, and her head had lulled back across her shoulder, exposing the pale line of her neck to him.

Everything in existence momentarily melted away. Rillan leaned down and kissed her neck, tasting her skin and taking in the scent of her arousal. A soft seductive beating just beneath the surface tantalized him. Rillan felt the hunger roll in his stomach

and surge through his dead body, as certainly as he felt her heartbeat pounding in her chest pressed against his. Before he could lose his control he pushed her away.

Rillan paced across the room. Mira's look of disappointed confusion was not lost on him as he stood near the fire. He laughed, almost manic as he stared into the flames eating away at the wood in the fireplace.

"Did I do something wrong," she asked timidly.

"No," he growled. "Get into the bed Mira." He could hear her moving to comply with the overly harsh demand.

Rillan didn't even look up at her. He knew full well that his eyes would frighten her. He was about to lose the fight with his hunger. He had waited too long. *This one deserves better*, his mind chanted. "Close your eyes Mira," he said almost too softly for her to hear. "Don't open them."

"Aren't you going to," she paused, too sweet and innocent to say what she was thinking. "I mean before..."

If Rillan didn't already feel guilty about everything he would have started to now. She actually wanted him to make love to her. He wanted so badly to look into her eyes, but he couldn't allow himself to frighten her any more than he already had. "I'm too hungry right now Mira. Touching you only makes it worse. After the feeding's done, I'll pleasure you." *My sweet one*, he added in his mind.

Mira's mouth went dry. She clamped her eyes shut and went stiff beneath the soft blankets. He couldn't have given her a more clear warning of his intentions. Mira could hear fabric rustling and then the bed moved.

Her heart pounded so hard against her chest that she feared it may explode through her rib cage. She could feel the shifting of the bed as he moved closer to her. The pressure was all around her. Her mind's eye clutched desperately to a vision of tanned leather skin, dark blue eyes, and a gentle smile. But in the endless moments she waited for him to touch her a monstrous image was steadily distorting the one she was trying to hold onto.

Rillan watched her tremble. The beast in him was pleased at the sight and smell of fear. He craved it. There was something sweeter about blood tainted with terror. He moved slowly, letting his icy touch make her flinch beneath him. Rillan pressed her head to one side and leaned down to bite her. In one swift movement, his fangs sliced into her flesh.

Mira whimpered in pain as she felt the sharp piercing, and then the rhythmic pressure as he sucked her blood from her. The darkness began to swim. Tears squeezed from her eyes, and she started to relax as she surrendered to the situation. Rillan's cold heavy body pressed down on her, pinning her beneath him. His icy grip on her arms was painful as he held her down, in case she decided to fight it. Mira was finding it difficult to breathe as the cold pressure on her chest, the pain searing through her neck, and the spinning darkness enveloped her. As she felt her consciousness slipping away, she surrendered gratefully to the black. *This is what it feels like to suffocate and die.*

Rillan took his time finishing his meal. He was careful not to take any more than he needed. Warmth flooded through his body, both from the blood and from being pressed against her. He reveled in the feeling, as the chill left him. It wouldn't last long,

but he would enjoy it while he had it. When he was sated, he lay down beside her and pulled her into his arms. Her back was to his chest, and her head rested on his shoulder. His body shifted back to normal, and he sighed contentedly as he held her.

Elizabeth drifted back into his mind. That was the last time he allowed himself the pleasure of keeping a woman in his arms as she slept. He took in a deep breath and let it out, staring up at the cave ceiling. She had been very different though. Elizabeth lost her mind almost the instant she had been delivered to him. It was easy enough to ignore. She wasn't crazy in most ways. Her mind simply chose not to acknowledge the demon half of him.

Elizabeth behaved as if she was his lover or wife, and life here was perfectly normal. At first it bothered him. But quickly he came to accept it as a reasonable way for her to cope with what he was. Elizabeth smiled and loved him, until he changed or needed blood. Then she would become catatonic until it was over. It was with Elizabeth that he learned to eat normal food again. She would cook dinner for him, make him clothes. After a while he even grew to like the way she adapted. It allowed him to forget himself when he was with her.

Now there was Mira. Rillan wondered how long she could last down here. If she were living amongst her people, he had no doubt that she would be the wife of a powerful person. She would give birth to warriors or teachers. She had the inner strength to know and accept what he was, the intelligence to be afraid of it, but the bravery to survive it. He held her tighter. He knew she could survive indefinitely down here. He would bleed her dry and watch her die slowly.

Rillan pressed his face into her hair and took a deep breath. This was exactly what he wanted for as long as he had been here. Now he was finding himself unable to justify keeping her. *The others were one thing. Sacrifices that were pitiful excuses for what the people I protect are capable of. To some extent I'm helping their population by eliminating such weak excuses for human beings. Mira, however, deserves to be married and have children. Things I can never give her.* A voice in the back of his head warred with him. *Haven't I earned this? She volunteered. It's what I want.* Rillan growled at himself and his own misery. *One year, he decided.*

Rillan wrapped his arms more tightly around her. She was young enough. *I'll keep her for a year. At the end of the year I'll send her back to her people, arrange for her to have whatever she needs, and have a new girl sent. For now, enjoy her company,* he told himself. Rillan could feel a strange pain in his chest. For the first time since he offered himself up for this life he was truly regretting his choice. He always believed that revenge and the good he did outweighed anything that life could have offered.

He closed his eyes and shut the thoughts out of his head. It wasn't long before he drifted to sleep holding Mira in his arms.

Chapter 5

One of the recent storms damaged the roof of the ancient round house. The elders glared with annoyance at the ceiling as several men continued the repairs, even through their conversation.

“We should consider moving this to a less dilapidated building.” The man talking was young and haughty. He was dressed in brown breeches and a tunic, but had spent enough time as a liaison to the southern Empire that he often chose to wear a toga while interacting with the rest of the villagers. He was chosen for his duties because of his obvious diplomatic abilities. Still there was some concern amongst the elders, when he began to conduct conversations with them in such a way as to make them think he may hold the Empire’s interests more to his heart than their own. “It’s not as if we don’t have the resources to live better.” He pulled at the neck of his tunic uncomfortably.

Various elders exchanged uneasy knowing glances. Finally one of them sighed. “You said that you have word from the city of Noviodunum, Darius.”

The young man rolled his eyes. “Fine, I’ll get straight to the point. Tiberius has been studying the histories. He’s found a pattern and similarities in the deaths of the leaders who threatened our settlements. He believes he knows what did the assassinations and who ordered it. He intends to send representatives to speak with you all once he has senate approval.”

Debris from the roof workers fell onto the table they were all gathered around. One of the elders shifted unhappily. “Thank you,” he said abruptly to the young diplomat.

Darius was obviously insulted by their dismissal and swept angrily from the room, as another volley of thatching spilled onto the table where he had been sitting.

The older man who sent him from the room turned to the men and women standing gravely around the table. "So it seems that Tiberius needs dealing with."

Each of the elders reached into their pockets and extracted a bone on which was carved a single rune and set it on the table. A wrinkled, shrunken woman stepped up to the small pile of runes and ran her hand over them, looking at each one. "The vote is cast. The letter to be written. Summon the vampire to the house of Tiberius Caelius Novanus."

The men and women all nodded. Another elderly voice chimed in, "There are other considerations this time as well."

They all looked meaningfully at the empty place at the table which had so recently been occupied by the young diplomat.

The old woman standing over the runes sighed heavily. "Yes, but find the truth quickly. There is little time."

Liam leaned in to hear the last of the short conversation in the room below and nearly fell through the roof. *Are the Fates trying to tell me something*, he wondered. He hadn't been able to get Mira out of his head, since he watched her walk through that gate. *If there was ever an opportunity to sneak in there and take Mira out, it would be now.*

* * * *

Rillan woke to a warm body trying to squirm out of his grasp. He opened his eyes and smiled, as he watched Mira attempt to get out of the bed without waking him.

“Trying to escape?”

Mira flinched, her head swiveled, and she leveled a glare on him that had him laughing. He pulled her, protesting, back into the bed. “Hey,” she squealed and fought against his iron grip to no avail.

Rillan was having none of it. He was glad she was feeling well enough to put up a fight, but he wasn’t ready to get out of bed yet. He still owed her the pleasure he promised, so he had plans for her before letting her go. Rillan moved so that he was propped over her and looked down into her annoyed eyes. “What,” he chuckled.

“You can’t let a person find a chamber pot with some dignity,” she snarled at him.

Rillan rolled off of her, laughing harder. It felt good. “Just come back. I’m not done with you yet.”

Mira scooted to the side of the bed. Her stomach turned some. It was nowhere near as bad as it had been the last time. Still, she wondered what he had in mind. “I don’t know if I’m up to whatever you’re thinking about. You’re not still hungry are you?”

Rillan’s good mood fell a bit. He sat up behind her and stroked her back. “No, not hungry. Are you all right? I guess I should have considered this. You tend to make me think in several different directions at the same time though. Do you need help?”

Mira blushed. “No, just tell me where the chamber pot is.”

Rillan got out of the other side of the bed and grabbed his robe from a chair nearby. He walked around to Mira and placed the robe over her shoulders. “It’s in the

stand there,” he said, pointing. “I’ll get the bath warming. You’ll feel better, after you get cleaned up and eat.”

He watched her stand, making sure that she could, and then left the room, not bothering to dress. Mira watched the hard muscled, naked man retreat into the darkness of the hall and saw some light begin to flood into the gloom. *He must be lighting candles.* She managed to find the chamber pot and finish with it before he came back.

As Rillan walked into the room with some things for the rarely used cook pot that was on the floor near the fire, Mira couldn’t help but appreciate what she saw. He was all lean and muscled. Firelight danced off his skin and Mira felt heat begin to pool between her legs, even if she wasn’t feeling at her best right then.

Mira was lost at what to think. The last time she was in his room he nearly killed her. Now he was warming a bath for her. It was difficult to decide how to behave or think with mixed signals like that. She sat on the edge of the bed.

Mira’s eyes drifted to the covered shaft that led outside. She hadn’t noticed before, but the angle of the bed seemed near perfect to allow for someone lying in bed to look out the shaft and see the sky. She wondered if he lay here at night watching the stars. *I would*, she thought longingly.

Staring at her from the fireplace, Rillan could see what she was looking at. He walked across the room and over to the release for the heavy door covering the shaft. Mira shifted nervously. She hadn’t known that he was watching her. “Fresh air would probably do you some good,” he said lightly and forced a solid bolt to the side, allowing the door to fall open.

From her seat on the bed she could see the moon off in one corner of the shaft. It was a clear night and stars dotted the sky. After a few moments Mira could smell the night breeze filtering down the shaft and into the room. She never wanted to close her eyes again.

"I'll leave it open," Rillan said. "Your bath is ready."

Mira finally tore her eyes away from the sky and looked at Rillan again. "Thank you." She wasn't sure what else to say.

Rillan nodded at her and gave her a weak smile. "Do you need help?"

She looked into his hopeful eyes. Mira was getting the distinct impression that Rillan was feeling badly about the way things had gone the last time she was here. She didn't know what he thought he was going to help with if she was in a bath. The thought had her blushing again, as a look of uncertain curiosity over took her soft brown eyes.

Rillan smiled. "Come on," he said, offering her his hand to lead her back.

Shadows danced around the hallway as Rillan led Mira to a wash room very similar to her own. There was a large tub set into the center of the room with steps to get in. Mira could smell rose water. When she looked into the tub, she found that there were petals floating in the water. Rillan took the robe from her shoulders and helped her into the water. The warmth seeped into her skin, as she sunk down into the fragrant bath. Before Mira knew what was happening, Rillan stepped in behind her, and water sloshed out of the tub around the sides. Sitting down, he drew her back into his arms.

After a few moments of surprised, uncomfortable, uncertainty, Mira relaxed. She let her head fall back against Rillan's shoulder and closed her eyes. A soft sigh escaped her lips, as the warm water took the chill from her body. Even as she thought

she might fall asleep, Rillan moved and reached for something. Mira was too tired. She didn't bother to open her eyes to see what was happening. She figured she would find out soon enough.

"Sit forward," Rillan said softly, and gently pressed her forward to prompt her into movement.

Mira finally opened her eyes and saw that he had soap and a thick plush cloth in one hand. She leaned forward, bringing her knees up to her chest, and laid her head on her knees, wrapping her arms around her legs and giving Rillan access to her back. She felt the soft cloth slide over her skin, and she sighed contently, letting her eyes close again.

Rillan put more soap on the cloth and ran it along her arms and down her sides. He took his time, watching the suds slide down her skin and into the water. Once he was satisfied with her back, he pulled her into his arms again. Mira felt the loose ends of the soapy cloth skim over her breasts, as he began washing her shoulders and chest. The soft cloth tickled over her skin. Her nipples puckered, as he spent some time soaping one breast and then the other. Mira arched her back, pushing her breast into the palm of his hand, moaning softly. Arousal and exhaustion warred with each other in her body. Rillan's hand moved down along her stomach, painfully slowly.

Mira parted her legs. Rillan's hand moved lower and lower along her stomach. He paused. The strange pain in his chest began again. He couldn't believe she was so willing and eager to let him touch her. She squirmed wantonly in his arms and lifted her hips, protesting the pause in his caress. Rillan bent his head and placed a lingering kiss on her neck and nuzzled gently along her jaw line, up to her ear, kissing random spots

as he went. He purposely held her off longer, wanting her to ask him for more, adoring the way she seemed to need him. He didn't really believe she wanted a monster this way, but what man was left in him was near tears with appreciation of the fact that she was even willing to pretend.

Another small groan escaped from Mira's mouth. Her hands reached beneath the water, took hold of his hand and pushed his fingers into her slit, delighting in the rolling pleasure that the pressure created in her lower stomach and up her body. Rillan slid his fingers teasingly along her slippery opening, letting her moans and movements guide his touch to where she wanted it. When her body began to tense and tremble in his arms, he was more than a little surprised. He pressed his finger inside her so that he could feel her come. Her soft inner walls sucked on his finger hungrily. Her whimpers in his ear told him, with a great deal of certainty, that it wasn't as satisfying as she would have liked.

Mira tried to push down further onto his finger as the fluttering sensations ceased, but the position in the tub and the confined space made it impossible for her to get the leverage she needed. She looked back at him over her shoulder with an almost desperate glow in her eyes. She was too shy to ask him to do anything specific to her. Even so, the need was there as she looked at him. Embarrassment flooded her when she realized how she was behaving.

Blushing a beautiful shade of crimson, Mira looked away from Rillan, uncertain how exactly she should be with him. She really didn't know what he wanted. *Am I a meal or a lover? An intruder in his space or a welcome guest? A friend or a reminder*

of all the worst parts of his existence? In lieu of knowing what he wanted from her, she opted on waiting for him to give her another direction of some kind.

Rillan was torn between crying and laughing. He pulled his fingers from her and she whimpered again. “Shh,” he whispered against her ear. “There’s more,” he promised. Rillan kissed her ear lobe then guided her to stand with gentle pressure against her back and sides.

Pulling a towel from the rack standing near the tub he wrapped her in it and then stepped out, turning to offer a hand for her to step down as well. Mira’s eyes roamed his wet naked body of their own accord. She allowed him to help her out of the tub and then stood in absolute bliss as he proceeded to dry her off with the towel he had wrapped her in. She could feel his hands through the soft material, massaging her shoulders, back, sides. He knelt in front of her and rubbed the soft towel over her hips, down her thighs, inside her thighs. Mira’s breath was coming in short gasps as she felt the need for his touch in very specific places building again.

Once Rillan was satisfied that she was dry, he stood with the towel in his hands and quickly ran it over himself. It was still wet from her body, but he was partially dry from the amount of time he had spent on her anyway. When he looked into her eyes again there was intense concentration staring back at him, and she was biting her lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

Mira watched his eyes bleed to black, as he stepped toward her. Her heart raced with fear once she saw the change. There was no running from him like this. The black sockets were unreadable, and she was certain that he was about to feed on her again.

To her surprise he only kissed her, sucking her lower lip into his mouth and tasting the sweet, warm, coppery liquid on his tongue.

Rillan scooped Mira up into his arms and carried her back to the bedroom. The air had cooled and smelled of the world outside: summer breeze and forest. He laid Mira on the bed so that she could gaze out the shaft at the night sky. With her eyes trained on the stars that she hadn't seen in so long, Rillan's change in demeanor vanished from her thoughts, and she nearly missed his movement over her body.

A gasp was forced from Mira's mouth as Rillan pushed her legs apart and leaned down to lick the soft pink folds of her sex. He looked up into her eyes with an accomplished grin. Mira stared back shocked and uncertain what to say or do.

"So it is possible to get your attention away from dreams of running outside," he said impishly.

"You are a very confusing man," she said, with a hint of anger in her voice.

As if testing her, Rillan leaned down and licked her again. Mira's eyes widened, watching as his tongue snaked out and stroked the sensitive flesh. He lingered on her clit, sucked it into his mouth, looking into her eyes again.

With her eyes drilling into him, he began to feel guilty again. Releasing her flesh from his lips he sat back, staring down at her exposed pussy, distracted as he spoke. His eyes were intent on memorizing every fold. "I'm sorry for that," he said. "The inconsistency. How badly do you want to see outside?"

Right now the only thing Mira wanted was the end to the conversation and something much larger than his finger or tongue inside her. She squirmed before him on the bed, her legs spread wide in a wanton display that she did nothing to correct. If

he put her in this position, she was willing to stay there. “Do we have to talk about that?” She was concerned where this was going and made a mental note to only look out the shaft when he wasn’t paying attention.

Licking his lips, Rillan continued to stare at her swollen weeping sex. *By all the gods she’s beautiful*, he thought. “No,” he said, never tearing his eyes from her. He reached down and stroked the protruding wet folds teasingly with a feather light finger, as he spoke. “But I will revisit the topic shortly. Only, tell me one thing.”

Arching her back, Mira tried to get more from his fingers than the cruelly light touch he was providing. “What,” she breathed heatedly.

“Tell me truthfully,” he stopped touching her and moved up her body. Pinning her down, he let the blackness take his eyes so that he was looking down on her trapped form with the beast. He watched her fidget beneath him, uncertainly, the flushed passion suddenly abated. “Do you really want this to make love to you,” he asked in almost a whisper. Rillan decided that he could handle it if she was only pretending for his benefit and her own self preservation. He would live with that. He wanted to know for certain what it was he was dealing with: a woman insane enough to want him or smart enough to lie to him.

Mira stared into the black. She didn’t want to answer him. It felt as though he could read her. “No,” she finally said.

Rillan nodded, the pain in his chest was back. *She’s smart*. The thought drifted listlessly through his mind. He shifted back to the task at hand, wishing he hadn’t wanted to know so badly. Without looking at her face, he moved his mouth to her breast, determined to bring her as much pleasure as her bravery afforded him.

When the wet heat of his tongue began swirling around her nipple, it was almost impossible for her to gain enough self control to stop him. She didn't understand the pain on his face when she answered him. *It isn't as if he's in love with me or even cares about me. Is it?* Mira forced Rillan to look at her. His eyes had returned to the deep blue that made her forget what he really was. They were a little glazed and concerned. Rillan was worried she had decided to stop this now that he made her admit she didn't want it.

"I want *you* to make love to me," she whispered timidly.

He looked into her eyes searching and shook his head. "That doesn't make sense."

Mira swallowed. "You, not the vampire," she explained. "Maybe I'll grow used to that in time. For now, can't it be you?"

Rillan didn't know how to respond to that. *She can't be real. I'm having some kind of dream.* Without a word he moved back up her body and kissed her. His lips pressed insistently against hers, his tongue searching her mouth. Mira wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him down onto her.

Mira felt his hard, thick, shaft press against her. She thought she might go crazy, if he continued torturing her like this. Rillan's lips moved from her mouth. He kissed and gently bit his way along her jaw to her neck, breathing her scent in and losing himself to her. He felt her hips writhe against him. Rillan's cock began to grow slick with Mira's pleasure, as she squirmed beneath him.

If he hadn't been near giving her what she wanted, he would have given in when Mira turned her head, her lips a breath from his ear, and whispered, "please."

Rillan pulled away from her, so that he could watch her face as he entered her. Intense passion glowed in her eyes. Ragged breathing hissed through her teeth. A sheen of sweat covered her skin. Rillan reached between them, took his cock in hand, and brought it to her entrance. He couldn't keep the soft smile from his lips, as his angel looked down to watch him penetrate her, a strange innocent curiosity on her face.

The thought was matter-of-fact, when it solidified in his mind. *I'm in love*. The smile slid from his lips at the realization. Slowly, watching her, Rillan began to push into her. After only a couple inches, Mira let her head fall back and her eyes close. Her breath caught in her chest. Rillan couldn't think of anything he had ever seen that could be more beautiful than this.

Mira moaned as the last of Rillan's cock was buried in her trembling body. Soft gasps and whimpers were forced from her lips, as Rillan began to move against her with slow deliberate strokes. Rillan tried to memorize each sound, gauging what she liked best from the different noises that his thrusts rang from her body. She seemed lost to the passion, and she was exquisite to see. Nothing else in the world existed beyond that bed.

Mira felt the heat and need growing in intensity, as he thrust faster and harder into her. Her hands fisted in the sheets, her back arched and her body on fire, Mira felt the passion explode in her like nothing she had ever known before.

Rillan could see how close she was. He fleetingly thought that it was watching her and not the act that was bringing him to the edge. When her cunt tightened and began to spasm around his cock, he fell over the edge as well, releasing into her.

Rillan couldn't stop staring at Mira, blinking was too much time lost. The small pleased, satisfied smile on her face, her eyes looking back at him with a shy wonder, her skin hot from exertion, covered in sweat, and blushing red under his gaze. She was perfect. Still, he couldn't help wonder how long this could possibly last.

Chapter 6

It's time, Rillan thought, standing outside the heavy door he closed on Elizabeth's room so long ago. He rarely ventured into that space. Walking down the hall, haunting memories assaulted him, reaching into his mind from the hanging cobwebs. He reached the main room and could almost see her sitting at the corner table, sewing. She was always sewing, and the room always smelled of cooking stew.

"Rillan," Elizabeth looked up from the pile of material in her lap that would eventually be a dress. The one she was wearing hung loosely from her frame. She didn't seem to notice that she had lost so much weight. "I was starting to get worried. It's been days." She laid the dress carefully on the table and virtually ran across the room into his arms.

"Easy, easy," he teased, holding her gently. "I'm in pretty bad shape this time." *Though, even in my worst shape, you're too withered to cause me any real pain.* Rillan buried the thought in the back of his mind. It was easy enough to do. Considering she never acknowledged the darker side of their existence, why should he?

Emerald green eyes stared up at him with concern. Elizabeth pushed him away from herself and looked him over. "What's wrong?"

"Same thing that's always wrong," he sighed. He hated what he did to Elizabeth when he returned, more than he hated assassinating the poor fools he was sent to kill. At least this time he wasn't so far gone that he attacked her without warning. "I'm weak. I need to feed."

"Is that all?" Elizabeth smiled. Her lips were still rose petal pink, though her face was gaunt and pale. "I have stew cooking. It will be ready soon. Sit down. I'll get

some bread and cheese for now.” Rillan allowed her to guide him to the bed and sat down. She stroked her hand over his forehead, brushing his hair back from his face. Kissing him gently on the cheek, she stepped back from him and disappeared to the hall toward the pantry.

Rillan breathed heavily. He could feel the blood lust building. Body aching with the need, he knew he wouldn't be able to play house as long as Elizabeth wanted. He felt obligated to participate in the farce for some time before taking from her.

Elizabeth reappeared from the hallway with bread and cheese in hand, as well as a bottle of wine. Humming happily to herself, she took the food to the table, produced a couple plates and some cups. In short order, she managed to set a pleasant table. It was all he could do to not fall upon her while she worked.

“Come over here and have something to eat,” she called.

Rillan forced himself to his feet and went to the table. With the air of a faithful wife preparing a meal for her loving and devoted husband, Elizabeth served the bread and cheese, poured Rillan some wine, and went to the hearth to check on the stew. More than a little concerned, Rillan realized that she looked much more skeletal than the last time he was in her rooms. *Has she eaten anything*, he wondered. He had noticed that she only ate when he was in her rooms. That alone spurred him to visit her much more often than he used to.

Elizabeth pulled the stew pot from the wrought iron hook over the fire. “I think it may be cooked well enough.” She smiled up at him, and Rillan noticed another tooth was missing.

She'll not survive another feeding, he realized. *She's too fragile*. His stomach turned. Rillan briefly considered leaving and seeing if he could find a worthy blood donor in one of the nearby cities. *I pledged to never do that*. If he did and was caught then the druids would end their relationship with him. *I'd never be able to live feeding off of people that way. I'm monster enough like this*.

"How was business in the city, my love?" Innocence and love stared at him from the emerald glow in her eyes. Those eyes were the only part of her that wasn't showing the wear of the past decade.

Rillan had even grown used to her strange questions. "I accomplished everything I was sent to do," he replied without pausing.

"I'm so proud of you. How many women have husbands as successful as mine?" Elizabeth virtually glowed with pride.

Rillan leaned across the table, took her hand in his, brought it to his lips, and placed a soft kiss on her palm. As his lips touched her skin, his senses fired. He could hear her pulse and smell the blood flowing through the veins in her wrist. Feeling his body begin to shift, he closed his eyes and tried to calm the beast within, but he knew that he was losing this battle.

"Elizabeth, take off your clothes and get into bed." His voice was tinged with the guttural demon tone that instilled fear in so many would be conquerors.

"But you haven't touched your stew," Elizabeth responded playfully, as if she didn't see or hear the change in him. "Isn't it a bit early for such games?"

Rillan wasn't able to cope with her teasing this time. "Just do as you're told," he growled. It took all the will power he had to keep from raising his eyes to hers. The last

time she looked directly into the black sockets, she fainted and didn't recover for over a week.

Nearly in tears at his tone, Elizabeth stood quickly and went to the bed. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean—"

"Don't," he snapped, stopping the apology. *The last thing I need is for her to start apologizing again.* "Do as you're told." Guilt washed through him, as he got up and put out the lights around the room, refusing to even glance in her direction. *I'll make it up to her in the morning,* he told himself. Swishing material sounds told him that Elizabeth was following his order.

Rillan turned toward the bed. He could see her in the darkness, feeling her way onto the bed. Removing his own clothing, he watched her crawl to the middle of the bed and lay down on her back.

Elizabeth stared blindly into the darkness. "Rillan?" Fear and uncertainty were growing in the pit of her stomach. *I've done this before.* Somewhere in the back of Elizabeth's mind a vision of fangs and empty black eye sockets sent a shockwave of terror through her body.

Standing next to the bed in the darkness, Rillan could hear the sobbing begin. He knew the progression by heart. In a few moments the crying would stop, the room would fall deadly quiet, and Elizabeth would black out. Each second was palpable, as he waited for her breathing to even out. Watching her through the pitch black, abject terror on her face, he considered ending it for her. In her state of mind, Elizabeth would never ask for death. Her denial was too complete. There were only these brief

instances, just before he fed on her, when lucidity overcame her fantasy, and she remembered what he was.

Finally, her trembling stilled, her heartbeat slowed, her breathing became shallow, and the last of the tears ran down her cheeks. Blank void was all that could be seen in her eyes. Rillan crawled up the bed next to her. Gently he ran his fingers over her face, closing her eyes.

Taking her in his arms, she felt even smaller than she appeared. Rillan cradled Elizabeth close to his chest and bent over her, biting her neck where her pulse seemed strongest. Warm blood flowed into his mouth, with each heartbeat. Careful to not take any more than necessary, Rillan only barely sated his hunger. Setting Elizabeth on her pillow, he lay down next to her and gathered her into his arms. Rillan knew that when Elizabeth woke, she wouldn't remember any of this. She would sigh happily and cuddle against him, as if they were lovers and nothing was amiss. Then she would make him breakfast and force him to eat it.

A crack of thunder caught his attention and he looked to the open shaft in the ceiling. Elizabeth's room was the only room, other than his, in the caverns that had a shaft to the surface. He couldn't remember if the door on the shaft in his room was shut. Briefly he considered getting up and going to make sure. A ledge above the shaft in Elizabeth's room prevented the rain from streaming into her room. The shaft in his room couldn't claim such a luxury, and he knew that the rain barrel wasn't under the shaft. Rillan started to pull away from Elizabeth to go deal with the problem, but a small whimper stopped him.

Rillan sighed, accepting that the carpet in his room may be soaked through by the time he got there. *Some things are more important*, he thought. Eventually, the sound of thunder, rain, and Elizabeth's heartbeat lulled him into a fitful sleep.

Blood running in rivulets down the shaft in his room and pooling on the floor plagued his dreams. Cold dead brown eyes stared at him, his latest victim reliving his slaughter while Rillan slept. He found himself walking away from the blood filled room and ghostly body. As he opened the door to his rooms, he walked out of the caverns into the clearing at the main entrance. Sunlight blazed down on him, searing his exposed skin. Ignoring the pain, he walked to the stone altar at the center of the fenced clearing to find a pile of parchment papers. So many papers covered the altar that they overflowed the edges and fell to the ground. He knew these papers well. Lifting one of the scraps of parchment, he read the name on it, then another. Some of the names were that of the men he had assassinated since coming to work for the druids. Other papers held the names of the women who had died in his service. Some of the names were unfamiliar to him, but he instinctively knew that the names belonged to dead people. Maybe they were the names of the faceless bystanders who were killed during his missions. Perhaps they were family or friends of the others he had killed. Either way, the papers were too numerous to count. A breeze from the mouth of the cave blew the papers off the altar. They flew into the sky and disappeared into the trees at the edge of the clearing. One paper remained on the altar. Rillan's hands trembled, as he lifted the paper and read the name scrawled on it. Elizabeth.

When Rillan's eyes opened, he already knew she was dead. Her body was still warm, but there was no heartbeat. A tear formed in the corner of his eye. He lay there

holding her for so long sunlight began to threaten at the mouth of the shaft. At last, he got out of the bed, refusing to look at the body he left behind. For days, Rillan refused to enter her rooms. He didn't want to face the task of taking her to the altar in the clearing. He didn't want a replacement. In the end, he turned off all feeling he had left, walked into the bedroom, wrapped the body in a blanket from the bed and carried her out of the caverns.

Elizabeth's small frame seemed to weigh tons, as he brought her into the fresh air and moonlight. "It's not right. The first time moonlight graces your skin in nearly a decade and you're not able to feel it," he whispered, laying her gently on the cold stone. He stood over her for a short time, unable to remember the words to the prayer that his people said over the dead. It had been too long since he last heard it. *Death is too constant around me. If I were to begin reciting the words I would never again be able to say anything else*, he thought despondently, before turning back to the darkness and solace of the caverns.

Returning to her rooms, Rillan stood beneath the shaft, reached up and closed the heavy wood and wrought iron door. The hinges creaking echoed down the halls and thudded with finality, and he forced the latch into place.

Reaching up through the cobwebs Rillan took hold of the latch. Gripping it tightly he pulled. Nothing happened. Years of disuse rusted it in place. Grim determination pushed Rillan on. Taking hold of the handle with both hands, Rillan's eyes darkened to black and his skin paled. One solid yank from the monster forced the rust immobilizing the latch to crumble, raining down on him in orange metal flakes. The sound of scraping metal screeched down the hallway, echoing out the main door and through the

caverns. Latch finally open, the heavy door groaned on its hinges, and the door swung wide. More than a century of accumulated dead leaves and rotting vegetation dumped onto Rillan from the neglected doorway to the outside.

Brushing himself off, he peered up the shaft into the night sky. Elizabeth's skylight wasn't as deep as his. The moon seemed a bit closer seen through this shaft, and it didn't take quite as long for the night air to filter down into the room. Fresh night breeze washed away the still stale air in the bedroom.

Elizabeth's room was exactly the same as the day he carried dead body out, with the exception of layers upon layers of dust and hanging cobwebs. "I really have my work cut out for me," he grumbled to himself. He walked to the table in the corner where Elizabeth had left the dress she was sewing that night. Picking it up, the fabric crumbled and sent a cloud of dust billowing across the room. Rillan choked on the air, but continued his task with determination.

Chills ran down Mira's back. A screeching metallic noise rang out down the hall, waking her. Sitting bolt upright in bed, her mind raced. She wasn't sure where she was or how she had gotten there. Slowly her eyes adjusted to the dim light dancing around the room from the fireplace. As the details of her room came into focus Mira, remembered with eerie clarity the last thing she did before falling asleep. *Or perhaps I should say passing out*, she thought.

"Rillan," she called into the darkness. There was no answer. "I wonder how long I was out this time." She could smell stew simmering in the kettle in the fireplace and there was a full pitcher of water and a cup on the stand next to her bed.

Mira sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Picking up her dressing gown from the foot of the bed she pulled it onto her naked body and slid off the edge of the bed. The frigid stone floor sent chills through her, and she quickly found her slippers. Memories of the first time she woke up after his feeding rushed into her mind. It surprised her to find that she didn't feel too badly at all this time. She began moving about the room lighting candles. She ladled some stew into a bowl and placed it on the table, before going to get some bread, cheese, and a bottle of wine from the storeroom.

Mira couldn't decide if she was disappointed or relieved that she didn't wake up in his bed. Her body tingled with the memory of what happened before she fell asleep. A smile crept across her lips, with the thought.

After she ate, Mira warmed herself a bath and went about trying to get back into her routine. However, she found that her mind continually drifted back to the night in Rillan's bed. She considered going to him again, but embarrassment held her back. Eventually, she wandered down to the study with all the books; half hoping she would run into him. But the halls were silent.

When she returned to her room, she took her silver whistle and sat down on her bed. After an hour of unsuccessfully trying to distract herself from the insistent tingle between her legs, Mira set the whistle aside. Nervously she scanned the shadows for any hint of movement that might reveal Rillan watching her.

When she was relatively satisfied that she was alone, Mira laid down on her bed. Hesitantly, she pulled her skirt up her body. She briefly considered how embarrassing it would be if Rillan caught her, as she slid her hand beneath her undergarments. A soft moan escaped her lips, when Mira's fingers slipped across her mound and into her wet

heat. Slowly she began stroking her clit, running her fingers in long satisfying caresses. Closing her eyes, she pictured Rillan sitting between her spread legs, his fingers exploring her pussy. Mira bit her lip and tried to hold back the whimper, as her body began to shake.

Mira lay there after the waves of pleasure calmed. *It would have been a lot more intense if Rillan had done it*, she thought, with some disappointment.

* * * *

“Liam, you’re insane,” his brother whispered in the darkness.

“It’s not like anyone can hear you,” Liam snapped. “Why do you insist on whispering?” He held the lantern higher and light reached farther down the tunnel fighting back the black.

“No one at the village may hear,” Gavin insisted, “but who knows what else might hear.” He held the pickaxe in his hands as if it were a weapon.

Liam shook his head. “Stop that. The tombs don’t connect to the vampire’s tunnels.”

“Sure that’s what they tell us. Liam... Is she worth this? She doesn’t even know how you feel about her. There are so many other girls in the village.”

Liam didn’t answer his brother. *Yes, she’s worth it*, he thought. “What does it matter? Now that Tiberius knows about the vampire, chances are that Rillan ap Tiernay won’t be returning from his latest mission. They’ll leave Mira in there to die, waiting for him to come back.”

“Just because the rumors say that some traitor told Tiberius how to kill Tiernay, doesn’t mean it will actually happen. I have a hard time believing that it could live this

long and be that easily dealt with. I don't care how good they think Tiberius is." Gavin's voice took on a solid confidence now that they were having a real conversation. The darkness seemed less oppressive as long as he kept what they were doing off his mind. "Besides, don't you think mother has been through enough?"

"What's that supposed to mean," Liam scowled at the mention of their mother.

"Liam," Gavin said seriously, forcing his brother to look at him. "Father only died recently. Mother has been through enough. The last thing she needs right now is for the entire village to be talking about the insanity of the sons of Arnauk. Digging in the tombs to try and reach the vampire caves. If we get caught it would kill her. And I don't want to deal with our sister either. Helen would be almost worse than mother."

Turning away from his brother and ignoring Gavin's arguments, Liam tried to force himself not to think about the consequences of his actions. "Let's try down here," Liam said, pointing toward a dead end at the end of the tunnel.

Gavin sighed heavily and followed, knowing that there was no dissuading Liam this time. The sight of corpses lying in niches around the alcove stopped Gavin. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this. Liam, this is wrong. If you have to do this, there has got to be another way."

Liam strode with purpose toward the back wall. Three bodies wrapped ceremoniously lay on stone beds carved into the wall. Runes decorated each shelf. "You tell me what the other way is, and I'll gladly change the plan." He carefully reached through the ages of dust and cobwebs, picked up the body, and reverently placed it with one of the other corpses on the opposite wall. "Until you come up with that plan though, could you give me a hand?"

Swearing under his breath, begging the Fates' forgiveness for himself and his brother, Gavin helped Liam move the bodies. Without a word, the two men took up position in front of the stone wall, lifted their pickaxes over their heads, and began chiseling away at the wall.

As the stone began to pile at their feet, Gavin turned toward Liam. "How do you even know you'll be able to find a way into the vampire's tunnels this way? What if we're destroying the tombs for nothing?"

Liam swung his axe with determination. "I'm getting her out of there Gavin. That's it."

* * * *

Cleaning Elizabeth's rooms took Rillan far more time than he first expected. Every night that week, he returned to his own rooms and turned his bath water black with dust.

He stood in the middle of the main room, examining his handy work. There wasn't a trace of dust, the rusted latch on the shaft cover had been replaced, he brought in new blankets, took all of the things that had been Elizabeth's to a storage room down the hall, he filled the store room with fresh food, and brought in wood for the fireplace.

Rillan propped the shaft open to allow fresh air to circulate through the chambers, and he left. Striding down the hall, pleased with himself, Rillan decided that he earned some sword practice. It had been a while since Rillan swung his sword. Over the past month, he was either not in the mood or busy with something else.

Lighting the candles in his practice room, Rillan shed his clothing down to his breeches, and selected a well used sword from a rack on the wall. Swinging it back and

forth, loosening the muscles in his arms, and rolling his head along his shoulders, Rillan approached the armored dummy. Shortly, the sound of clashing metal on metal rang out down the hallway.

Book in hand, Mira walked down the hall toward the study. She wasn't sure what she wanted to read next. *There was that book of stories about dead leaders or that book about the creation of the sun.* She paused and looked around. *Or maybe one of the history books on the top shelf. I wonder if he would notice if I borrowed those. I wonder if he would care. After all, I'm down here with him and not going anywhere. The elders would never know.*

Mira was suddenly snapped out of her thoughts by the sound of metal striking metal. A smile crept across her face. Without thinking, she passed up the door to the study and continued to the end of the hall and the large wooden double doors.

Mira could see the light emanating from cracks around the door. She pushed the door open, and light spilled out into the hallway. Standing in the doorway, Mira watched Rillan sparring with the armor clad dummy.

Rillan only barely registered that the door swung open, but he rarely missed a change in his environment. That type of observation had long since become second nature to him. Continuing to batter the dummy, he waited to see if she would approach, a smile on his face.

Mira contemplated what excuse she was going to use for seeking him out and interrupting him while he was practicing. Just as she was turning to disappear back down the hallway, he called out to her.

“You came all this way, Mira, presumably looking for me. Is there a reason you’ve changed your mind about whatever it was?”

“Shouldn’t you be at least a little out of breath after all of that,” Mira asked timidly, trying to change the subject.

His warm smile virtually pulled her into the room. “I don’t tend to get out of breath.”

Mira walked up to him, her mind grasping for a good excuse. *Why didn’t I think of this before? I’m going to look like a complete fool.* “Uh, I was wondering if the rugs in my rooms would be replaced,” she sputtered, in what she believed to be a sudden stroke of genius.

Rillan stared into her eyes. He knew she was hiding something, but he couldn’t figure out what she could possibly be trying to keep from him.

“Actually, I intended to talk to you about that.” Rillan leaned his sword against the dummy and picked up his shirt from the arm of the chair. “Come with me.” He started walking toward the door pulling the white shirt over his head.

Mira felt her heart begin to race. She hated that he was putting on a shirt. “Where are we going?” Rillan didn’t answer her. He looked back at her over his shoulder in the darkness. Mira couldn’t see the excited glint in his eye, but it was obvious that he was pleased with whatever he was doing. They approached a door which Mira only vaguely remembered being there.

Rillan stopped outside the door with his hand on the latch. “I asked you how badly you wanted to see outside, and you never answered me.”

Confusion surged through her. She looked at the door he was standing in front of. The implication was pretty clear that behind the door there was something to do with outside. He didn't sound as if he was angry or annoyed with her. "I know. I don't really know how to answer that."

"I have a gift for you."

Mira's heart pounded relentlessly against her ribcage. "I don't understand."

Rillan smiled in the darkness. "You will." He lifted the latch and pushed the door open. He held it aside for Mira to go in.

Cautiously she stepped past him and walked down the short hall to the bedroom at the end. The open shaft immediately drew her attention. Fresh air pouring into the room drew her closer. Standing beneath the open shaft, she stared up into a starry night sky.

"If you move the bed to the right spot, you should be able to see the sky as you're falling asleep."

Mira turned to look at him, tears in her eyes, afraid to say anything.

"You don't have to move into this room. There is no music room, or any of the other rooms that your current quarters have. Originally, I never expected companions to remain in their rooms all the time. That situation developed over the years. This room is more like mine: the bedroom, a bathing room, and a small storage room. In the beginning, the rooms that you're currently living in were meant to be a separate area to go to for entertainment. The room that is your bedroom used to be a library." When Mira still didn't respond, Rillan became concerned and added, "Like I said, you don't have to move into this room. I thought you might like it better."

"I do," Mira finally said, a catch in her voice. She walked haltingly toward him and without hesitation wrapped her arms around his neck, buried her face against his shoulder and began crying into his shirt.

"I hope those are good tears," Rillan said with concern, stroking her hair gently.

"Very good tears," she sobbed.

Rillan loved the feel of her warmth against his cold body. He held her, while she tried to get control of herself. When Mira finally looked up, Rillan cupped the side of her face with his hand and wiped a tear away from her cheek with his thumb. *She's even beautiful through tears.*

At first Rillan didn't understand the intensity in her deep brown eyes. Nothing ever shocked him as much as the kiss Mira placed on his lips. Momentarily stunned, Rillan stood there motionless, letting her kiss him. When it eventually sunk in what was happening, Rillan swept Mira up into his arms and carried her to the bed. The kissing grew more passionate, as he pulled her skirt up to her waist and worked his hand beneath all the material.

Mira let out an appreciative hiss, when his fingers delved between her legs. Driven on by Mira's obvious desire for him to make love to her, Rillan took hold of her skirt and ripped the waist band. He pulled it from her body, leaving her completely naked from the waist down. Watching her flushed expression for any sign of reluctance, Rillan untied his breeches and pushed them down his thighs, moving forward between her legs.

Dark blue eyes gazed wantonly into brown, and Rillan pushed his cock into her without pause. Mira grabbed the white material of his shirt in her fists, struggling to pull

it over his head and off his body. She threw the shirt to the floor beside the bed and ran her hands over his chest. Hands on the bed to either side of her, Rillan braced himself over Mira, thrusting into her over and over again. He listened with pleasure to the whimpers and moans pouring from her lips. He was amazed. One thought blazed through his mind. *She started this.*

Mira trembled. Her small hands squeezed his shoulders, and her face contorted into a mixture of pain and pleasure, as she came. Seeing her give in to the torrent of passion was more than he could take. Rillan's body tensed, his hands clenched the blankets, and he growled his release. His arms nearly collapsed under him. With some effort, he fell to the bed next to Mira. Waves of sensation pulsed through his body. Mira rolled to her side, laid her head on his shoulder, and sighed her satisfaction, as they lay together, recovering.

"I don't believe I've felt anything like that since I died," he said under his breath, too softly for Mira to hear. He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. "If I had known that this would be my 'thank you' I would have cleaned this room up for you long ago," he teased.

"I didn't realize how much I wanted something like this," she said.

Rillan smiled wondering if she meant the sex or the view of the sky. "I'll do my best to make you happy while you're here," he said seriously.

"You truly make no sense." Mira propped herself up on his chest so that she could look down into his eyes.

"Maybe someday I'll explain why. For now, take me as I am." Rillan considered how happily he brought her to this room. *I guess it's time to let Elizabeth go. Perhaps*

she had something to do with bringing you to me, he mused, staring into her sparkling brown eyes.

Mira leaned down and kissed him again. Slowly they removed the rest of their clothing, worked their way beneath the blankets, and spent the rest of the night together.

Chapter 7

A gentle breeze sighed, sweeping through the branches of the trees surrounding the clearing. Rillan never could decide if the empty clearing late at night was peaceful or ominous. He waited in the shadows of the cave mouth, until he was positive no one was watching. Slinking through the shadows, he made his way to the stone basin where letters were left for him. Cold acceptance was all he felt, when he saw the parchment, gleaming white, reflecting moonlight in the darkness.

I knew it would happen, he told himself. *The past few months have been more dream than reality anyway.* He didn't know if the annoyance he felt was with himself or with the druids. Without looking at it, he pocketed the letter and gathered the supplies. Arms full of bags of food, he trudged through the caves. Normally he would take the food into Mira's store room, but he didn't want to face her yet. Dumping the supplies in a storage room off the main hallway, Rillan headed for his own rooms.

A sweet cheerful melody called to him, as he passed the door to Mira's room. She played for him often lately. Usually the sound reached into him, drawing a long absent smile from his lips. Now it only served to remind him that this happiness was fleeting. He closed the main door to his rooms behind himself. Upon reaching his bedroom, Rillan grudgingly pulled the letter from his pocket. Sitting down in a large chair next to the fireplace, he held the letter in his hand, staring at it.

A long moment passed while he contemplated the ramifications of not taking the assignment. *In all the years I've done this, no woman has ever affected me to this extent.* Rillan growled at himself. *This is my job.* He turned the letter over with intent. A

red wax seal held the letter closed. He barely glanced at it, as he broke the seal and opened the folded parchment.

“Tiberius Caelius Novanus,” he read aloud. Rillan didn’t know the man. He had been underground too long to know the current leaders. This was yet another point of contention in his mind. He was torn between being blissfully unaware of who he killed and keeping tabs on current events, if only to keep the druids honest in their targets. The only problem with the latter was the guilt he felt when he knew of the families the men he killed left behind.

Ripping the parchment into several pieces he stood and tossed it into the fireplace. He rarely lit the fire, preferring the darkness in his rooms. This was one of the few exceptions. He always burned the parchment that bore the names of his victims. Flames leaped up from the old coals in the grating. Slowly the flames danced higher, licking at the wood until the paper lying on the top of the pile caught fire. Rillan watched the paper burn, the red seal melting to run like blood into the tinder.

As the fire blazed in the hearth, Rillan returned to his chair, considering how he would prepare Mira for what was to come. *There’s always the chance that it won’t take long, and it won’t be too bloody. The possibility exists that I’ll return here with my mind intact.* Rillan could count on one hand the number of times that happened. He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair, while the fire burned on. *This was inevitable. I knew that the assignment would come. But so soon? The Fates couldn’t have given me a year,* he thought.

Rillan couldn’t stop thinking about all the time he spent with her since he gave her Elizabeth’s room. It started with helping her move the things she wanted to the

room. After that she offered to play some music for him. Within days, he found that he was rarely without her. At first he believed it was only the dark loneliness of his well furnished tomb that brought her to him so often. When she began making it clear that she liked sleeping in his bed or having him in hers, he began to wonder if she truly felt something for him aside from fear. He had yet to have that conversation with her. For the moment he was happy in his oblivion.

The last of the flames shrank into the coals and even the glowing embers were fading. Forcing himself to bottle his upset, Rillan composed himself, took his heavy cloak from the chest at the end of his bed and left his rooms.

On the way to Mira's rooms, he stopped in the large main room at the end of the hall to collect his sword. Lifting the weapon, Rillan examined it, contemplating the number of heads the blade had severed from bodies. *I suppose there is some comfort in the idea that the blood is on the sword and not my hands.* He collected his sheath from the weapons rack and thrust the weapon into the soft, supple leather, hearing the familiar thwack as the hilt stopped against the lip of the sheath. Clearing his mind of all thought, he strode out of the room and down the hall.

He only briefly knocked on the door, before letting himself into her room and walking down the short hallway toward her bedchamber. Fresh night air greeted him, when he opened her door. He smiled and shook his head. *She never closes it.* Remembering what he was there for, the smile fell from his face. Mira lay asleep in her bed. There were times he didn't bother to warn his companions or say when he was leaving. He shoved the thought out of his mind. She deserved better than that.

Moonlight puddled on the bed around her head and shoulders. She had moved the bed beneath the shaft, so that she could stare up at the sky. The soft white glow exaggerated her pale skin. *She looks to be a spirit or fey.* Rillan reached out and stroked her cheek gently. “Mira, I need to speak with you.”

There was just enough volume and insistence in his voice to wake her. Mira stretched happily, the blankets falling away to show that she was naked in bed. She smiled up at him sleepily. “I had resigned myself to sleeping alone tonight.”

He eyed her skeptically, staring at her bare breasts. His hand trailed down the side of her neck, along her chest, and skimmed teasingly over her nipple. “Do you always sleep naked when you believe you’ll be sleeping alone?”

The stoic tone in his voice told Mira that something was wrong. “What is it?”

Refusing to think any more about the situation, Rillan sat down on the edge of Mira’s bed. His voice hard and forceful, he stared unwavering into Mira’s eyes. “I won’t be staying tonight. I need to feed, and then I leave on assignment.”

Unconsciously Mira pull the blanket to cover herself. A chill went through her body at the image summoned up in her mind when he mentioned feeding. *No matter how much I love the man, I think I’ll forever fear the demon.* “Alright,” she said meekly. “Do you know when you’ll return?”

“No. Be prepared for the possibility of something worse than the first time I used you.”

Something about the way he phrased it made Mira cringe. “Okay,” she said, overcome with grim acceptance.

Rillan watched her staring at and clinging to the blanket. Anger and frustration with himself took hold of him. In a sudden rush, his eyes sunk into his head, black as night. The skin of his face pulled tight to his skull, making his mouthful of dagger sharp fangs appear lipless and larger, protruding from his head.

Mira suppressed her scream, shrinking back from Rillan. Usually the room was pitch black, and she submitted to rough hands in the dark, then pain that caused her to black out. The moonlight on his face was more than she could handle. As Rillan moved in to take her, she fainted. The vampire cared little for whether his prey was conscious or not. Tearing the blanket from her breast, Rillan descended on her with fiendish pleasure. Biting down viciously on her collar, he reveled in the feel of warm blood, thick and sweet, spraying into his mouth with each heartbeat. Clawed hands wrapped around her upper arms tight enough to pierce the skin and leave bruises to form in the morning.

He needed very little blood this time. After he took his fill, the vampire stood, leaving Mira awkwardly bent over across the bed. He walked toward the shaft in the ceiling, staring out at the moon. The vampire didn't even spare a glance back at the crumpled form in the bed. Leaping up into the shaft, the movement was second nature. Rillan was a blur of dark movement, crawling spider-like along the stone walls, casting a shadow over Mira, until he slunk over the crest of the shaft into the night.

* * * *

Mira woke, hunched over in bed, with an ache burning in her back and hip. Sunlight beamed in through the open shaft, onto the bed. Lifting her face toward the light, she let warmth seep into her skin. Images of her last moments with Rillan flashed

through her mind. Ignoring them, she wondered how long she was out and when Rillan would return. His words haunted her. The last thing she wanted was another awakening like that first one.

Sighing, Mira pushed the blankets back and stood, stretching her sore body. She looked up and out the shaft again, grateful that he allowed her to have the luxury of being able to see the sky. With that thought in mind, Mira set to work preparing the room for the misery she anticipated. She moved the chamber pot closer to the bed, made sure the pitcher had fresh water, and she began preparing stew with the intent of keeping it going until the ordeal was over.

* * * *

The moon slipping down beneath the horizon would have told Rillan it was time to find shelter for the day, if he didn't already feel the sun sneaking up behind him. His path, carefully planned, took more than a week to reach Noviodunum. As fast as he traveled, the dawn always forced him into hiding, impeding his progress.

Small stone and timber round houses, cared for and watched by the druids, served as way stations, strategically placed in his path to the city. He traveled this trail so many times over the years he could have done it in his sleep. Rillan walked through the door as the sun peeked over the tree line. He closed it securely behind himself and made his way to the straw filled mattress on the floor. He didn't bother to light the fire. He knew he wouldn't need it. Periodically, over the years he lit the fire, as a pleasant distraction. The last few trips, however, he had taken to sleeping from the time he walked in until he left. He spent less time thinking that way.

Rillan felt as though he only just closed his eyes, when he sat up on the bed and noticed there was no light filtering through the cracks in the old build's roof. He took a moment to stretch and yawn before slinking out the door into the night.

The first few nights went the same as every other assignment, sleeping through the day and moving with the night. Two days from the city, as the first light of day began to color the sky Rillan came to what used to be his stopping point. The charred stones of the round house foundation were long cold and the surrounding forest was silent. Rillan guessed that the burning took place days before if not longer.

Walking around the pile of ash and stone, Rillan found no sign of who burned it or why. *It may be possible that someone in power in Noviodunum knows I'm coming. If the caretaker had gotten away from this then we would have known that the place was burned. So either he's dead or captive.* Rillan looked to the lightening sky. *I wonder how much he told them and if the safe houses closer to the city are destroyed as well.*

Accepting the possibility that there may be no more shelter between himself and Noviodunum, Rillan pulled the heavy wool hood on his cloak up and around his shoulders, careful to obscure as much skin as possible from the oncoming light. It wouldn't kill him, but it would be painful and completely drain him before he even reached his target.

Rillan kept to the shadows as much as possible. Travel was slow going. He didn't want to get into town with obvious burns on his face or hands. Most people wouldn't know what he was. Still they may think he carried some disease. That would make getting a room at the inn nearly impossible.

The sound of horse hooves pounding through the dirt prompted Rillan to take to the trees. Hiding in the branches of a tall oak, he watched several uniformed men on horseback charge through the woods. He couldn't help his suspicion, considering he wasn't traveling on a trail of any kind. When the horses disappeared into the trees, Rillan climbed down again.

Risking exposure to the sun he chose to speed his travel. *Something isn't right*, he thought. He contemplated the circumstances of the assassinations he had performed over the past few years. They were all political, by his understanding. That could mean attempted retribution for any of the factions that may have been affected by the death of a leader. *I suppose there has to be someone in Noviodunum intelligent enough to draw a connection between the assassinations and the druid nations. As intelligent as the elders are, I can't imagine that no one has noticed over the hundreds of years I've been doing this that the people who die are the ones who lobby for northern assimilation and movement.*

Near nightfall, he came to the remains of the next round house in his path. As he knelt to examine some ashen footprints in the underbrush, shuffling from nearby bushes caught his attention. Darkness was descending on the decimated clearing. Knowing he was already seen, Rillan stood and pushed the hood of his cloak back. His eyes bled to black and sunk into his skull. His senses sharpened and the sound of a rapidly beating heart called to him. Turning toward the sound, Rillan cocked his head and peered menacingly directly at the source of the sound. Shallow breathing quickened in the darkness.

"I can smell your fear," Rillan hissed at the hidden prey.

Suddenly a flurry of movement burst from the bushes, and a human form scrambled into the trees, running for his life. With the callous nature of any hunter pursuing his prey, Rillan followed with practiced ease. In a matter of moments, he was behind the figure. Savage clawed hands grabbed a flailing body and slammed it into a nearby tree. A head hit the tree with a sickening thud.

“Give me a reason not to drain your life and leave you as carrion for the wolves,” Rillan sneered, in a deadly undertone, through a mouthful of daggers. The demon didn’t register that the form he menaced was only barely a young man.

The boy whimpered an inaudible response, as the vampire drew closer. Wide eyed with terror, staring into black, lifeless sockets where eyes should have been, the only thing the boy could manage to say was, “please.”

The distinct foul odor of urine assailed Rillan’s senses and caused a pause. Somewhere, far off in the black of the forest a desperate voice called out, “Briac! Briac! Where are you boy?”

Reality swept in, and the vampire retreated. When Rillan looked at the boy again, he was unconscious and had peed himself. Rillan laid the boy down on the ground and stared at him with sympathy. *The Fates have blessed you with great luck child*, Rillan thought, realizing that he was more on edge than he originally anticipated.

Turning toward the concerned calls in the darkness, Rillan decided to chance that the boy and whoever was looking for him were not a threat. He had some questions that they may be able to answer, and he wanted to know why they were this far from the city at dusk. “He’s here,” Rillan called out in answer to the increasingly frantic cries.

"Where," the voice returned.

"Here. Follow my voice."

Minutes later a short, barrel-chested man in roughly made brown breeches and vest came into sight through the trees. "Thank the Fates," he breathed heavily, when he saw the boy lying on the ground. He brushed past Rillan and knelt next to the Briac. "Do you know what happened here, stranger?"

"He appears to have fainted," Rillan responded sympathetically, as the man examined the boy. "I believe he hit his head. I think I frightened him. He ran."

The man looked up at Rillan momentarily. "He has always been skittish." The man paused and wrinkled his nose, as he noticed the urine stained pants. "I told him not to wander off." He stood up and offered a hand to Rillan in greeting. "Well met, my friend. I thank you for your help. I never would have found him if you hadn't called out. I'm Brian. The lump on the ground is my son Briac."

Rillan nodded and clasped the man's wrist. "Rillan. Please don't thank me. He would have found his way back to you himself, if I hadn't scared the wits out of him."

"The fool deserved it. I told him to stay close. The wood is dangerous these days. My camp isn't much, but you're welcome to share it if you wish. Safety in numbers." The man released Rillan's wrist and bent to pick up the boy. He lifted Briac easily and threw him over his shoulder to take him back to his camp.

"I appreciate the offer, but I have a long way to go yet."

"You're traveling at night?"

"I've never had trouble with it before," Rillan replied, as they walked toward Brian's camp. "I'm not from this area. Can you tell me why you speak so ominously, and yet are in the forest yourself?"

Brian gave Rillan a sidelong suspicious look. "You haven't heard about the upheaval in Noviodunum?"

Rillan sighed heavily. "No."

There was a long pause, as Brian debated how much he should say to a complete stranger he found standing over his son's unconscious body in the forest at night. He was starting to wonder if Rillan had more to do with Briac's condition than he originally thought. Clearing his throat, he decided on some common knowledge information that couldn't get him into too much trouble if this guy was one of Tiberius' men. "A new militant faction has come to power. The new senate is bent on fortification of the current holdings. There have been some attacks from barbarians to the east. But more than that, they're recruiting for the army."

Suddenly Rillan understood why the man and his son were in the forest a day's hard travel from the city. "Recruiting?"

Brian stopped walking and faced Rillan as if to answer a challenge, a hard angry look in his eyes.

Rillan held up his hands and shook his head. "I'm nothing to do with the army, friend. Honestly, do I look like I belong in the army?"

Brian really looked at Rillan for the first time. His clothing was a bit old fashioned, but well made. To Brian's mind, Rillan looked a bit out of place. *It's almost as though someone plucked him from a 100 years ago and set him down in the forest.*

Still, at least he wears breeches and not a toga or kilt. “No. I guess not.” Brian backed down and started walking toward camp again.

“So are the burned houses part of the recruiting process,” Rillan asked. *If it’s wide scale, then it may not have anything to do with me.*

“I wouldn’t put it past them to burn houses. They don’t like being told ‘no,’ and they like making examples of people.”

Rillan nodded contemplatively. “And what of the settlements to the north?”

“I’ve seen several groups of men marched into town in chains. Pressed into service. I guess Tiberius is desperate enough for soldiers that he’s collecting men from the northern communities. Keeps them in the army under threat of harm to the women and children left behind.”

Rillan had fallen victim to a similar recruiting method in his youth. Anger boiled in him. *At least I know that this target deserves it.* “If Tiberius is taken out of power, who takes up where he left off?”

Brian paused again and shot Rillan a measuring look. “Could be anyone in the senate. One tyrant is about the same as the next.”

“I guess it’s too much to hope that he might be replaced by a good man,” Rillan said, staring off into the darkness. As the men emerged from the tree line, Rillan spotted a small pile of gathered sticks and branches alongside two small packs.

Brian bent to set Briac on the ground. “Whether or not a man is good is relative to the next and what he wants and believes,” Brian said. “There are plenty of men in the senate who believe Tiberius to be the savior of the nation.” Brian pulled a pack over to where he was crouching and took a thin blanket out of it. “I suppose if you take into

consideration that the eastern border would be overrun by now without the men Tiberius has pressed into service, you might say that Tiberius is only doing what is necessary.”

Looking up from Briac’s limp form, Brian found that he was completely alone. There was no trace of Rillan anywhere. Quickly, he piled the sticks and branches together. “Spirits,” he whispered fearfully, as he hurriedly lit the campfire, staring into the trees, uncertain if Rillan had been real or a figment of his imagination.

* * * *

Noviodunum streets at night were mostly abandoned. A few women draped in loose colorful sarongs stood near the main doors of a brothel next door to the largest of the inns on the main street. Candlelight shone in all the windows and sounds of drinking and debauchery wafted out the windows and filled the street in front of the buildings.

Rillan noted the new buildings and streets in the town since the last time he was there. Each time he ventured into this godforsaken city it was larger, louder, and more depraved. Still, even with the expansion of the city, the inner streets were the same. Keeping to the shadows, he worked his way through the newer alleyways, into the older streets and toward the domi of the senators.

Tonight was for scouting. Rillan established a routine long ago. He walked the streets near the senators’ domi, reminding himself of the locations of various landmarks. There was a time when he could have called this place home.

There was one stop he needed to make. Easily picking his way through the rat infested alleyways, Rillan found himself staring at a rotted wooden door. Lightly rapping on the door he feared it might break in half and fall in. There was no answer.

This was the last chance for the druids to revoke the decision they made in sending Rillan to assassinate Tiberius. Rillan closed his eyes and concentrated. He couldn't smell or hear anything from behind the door, at least nothing beyond the rest of the human and rat waste that soiled the air in the alleyway.

Pushing gently on the poor excuse for a door, half concerned that anything stronger would be the end of the entryway, Rillan walked in. He checked the room over for signs that anyone had been there recently. He was fairly certain that he wouldn't find the marking which meant that his assignment was canceled. Still he felt obligated to look. The small store room was littered with broken and crumbling wooden barrels. There were piles of debris scattered about the room. Rillan didn't even want to guess what may be hiding beneath the foul smelling piles.

Leaving the back room, he walked through to what, in a different age, had been the best shop in town. Mosaics with missing tiles and crumbling furniture decorated a decaying sitting room. He checked the front of the shop as a matter of course. There was no one to be found. Signs of habitation, recently evacuated, disturbed the dust on the stone floors. But that was the extent of the excitement in the place.

Rillan returned to the abandoned store room. Picking his way through the mess to a back corner, he kicked some debris off into the darkness. A clattering sound from the disturbed clutter caught his attention and Rillan noticed a small round black thing rolling across the floor. Momentarily distracted from his mission, he walked after it and picked it up. Staring at the small bead in his hand, Rillan realized he was holding a black pearl.

I wonder how long that's been waiting in this chaos to be found. It was relatively small and easily over looked. If it hadn't gone rolling across the floor, he would have mistaken the little gem for a stone or just another speck of dirt on the floor. He chuckled. *Maybe anyone else who saw it thought it to be shit.* Rillan suddenly found himself thinking of Mira. *A rare speck of beauty amongst rotting darkness.*

Rillan carefully placed the small pearl in his pocket and went back to the place on the floor where he started. Kneeling he traced the edge of one stone tile and, finding a notch in the side, lifted it from the floor. Beneath it, Rillan found a shallow indent. *I didn't think* so, he thought, replacing the stone. If the mission were to have been revoked, he would have found a letter or some means of marking within the hiding place. To date he had never been called off his task once he started.

Having established that he was still in play, he retraced his steps and returned to the large inn he passed on the way into town to get a room. Upon entering the inn, Rillan realized that he could count on one hand the number of men in breeches in the main room. There was an obvious distinction and segregation. The men wearing breeches and shirts sat together at a table in one corner of the main room. Judging by the clean look of their boots and the white of their shirts, Rillan figured that they were probably fairly wealthy. They sat quietly conversing.

The men in togas and kilts boisterously circulated throughout the room. A good number of them were accompanied by scantily clad women. A virtual orgy was starting at the far end of the large long table in the center of the room. A couple fair skinned women, sitting on either knee of a soldier wearing a battered but ornate breastplate and spaulders were being undressed by soldiers standing to either side of the one seated.

One of the men was groping the woman he was undressing. His hand roughly squeezed her breast and lifted it toward his face as he leaned down to wrap his mouth around the woman's large brown nipple.

Rillan turned away in disgust, looking for the innkeeper. As if on cue, a fat, greasy, bare-chested man in a dirty toga waddled up to Rillan, eyeing him up and down with distaste. His eyes finally lingered on the gold clasp affixing Rillan's cloak. Suddenly, the man's demeanor shifted, and he appeared much friendlier. "Can I be of service to you, barbarian?"

Rillan smiled at the condescending tone in the man's voice. *Barbarian?* Rillan scoffed openly. "How much for a room for the week," Rillan replied, in a hard intimidating tone.

The greasy innkeeper shifted uncomfortably and answered with more respect. "One sestertius for the week."

Reaching into his purse, Rillan pulled out two silver coins. "I'm not to be disturbed," he said, placing the two coins in the man's grubby hand.

Turning them over in his hand the innkeeper examined the old coins. The senator's head on the coin was turned the wrong way. He looked questioningly at Rillan, held one coin to his mouth and bit down. *Silver is silver.* "As you like it," the man said, once he was satisfied with the authenticity of the money. He waved a hand, signaling a girl to join them. The girl's round, brown eyes reminded him of Mira, but spoke of the south, while her narrow face was distinctly of the druid nations. She smiled warmly at Rillan. "Arial, take this man to a room. Make sure he has everything he requires."

The irony of that statement, Rillan thought as he followed the pretty girl. She led him out a door in the back of the main room into a poorly kempt courtyard open to the sky. It was surrounded on all sides by columns, propping up an overhang forming a peristyle. Beyond the columns were numerous doors, most of which were closed. Rillan could hear the distinct sounds of rough sex coming from behind various doors. He walked with Arial through the center of the courtyard, around a water filled basin, and past the columns directly across from the main building. Choosing a door that was slightly ajar, Arial stepped into the small room ahead of Rillan. There was only an unmade bed in the small room. It smelled of rancid wine, urine, and other things that Rillan didn't even want to contemplate. Even knowing that his nose was more sensitive than humans, he wondered at a person's ability to sleep in this.

"You come to be used to it," Arial said softly, when she noticed the look in Rillan's eyes.

He faced her and shook his head sympathetically. "It's enough to make me think sleeping in the stables would be more pleasant. No one should have to grow used to it."

A sad expression came over her. "Some have no alternative." Arial suddenly snapped back to being sweet and comely, as if she remembered that she should be smiling at the wealthy man in front of her. She stepped up to Rillan and ran a gentle hand across the bulge in the front of his pants. "Is there anything else you require? Dinner? Wine? Company?" Arial's experienced fingers traced along Rillan's rapidly growing shaft.

This was the first time he thought of sex since he left Mira. He hated the way he parted with her. Arial's attention made him acutely aware of how used to sleeping with a woman he had become. Sighing, he took hold of Arial's wrist, brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her softly on her palm. Staring into her eyes, Rillan could see a hopeful glimmer. "I'm afraid that I'll not be needing company this night Arial." Disappointment clouded her pretty brown eyes. *You'd not be so upset if you truly knew me, sweet one.*

"I guess I should go to the other guests then," she said regretfully.

At that, Rillan realized what that would mean. Pulling another sestertius out of his purse, he placed it in her hand before releasing her wrist. "Have this night to yourself."

Arial stared in wonder at the coin, speechless. She shoved the coin into a hidden pocket in her sarong, as if someone would see it and try to take it.

The grateful smile on her face was more than Rillan could handle. He decided to change the subject, before she started talking. "Tell me who a man speaks with, if he wants to know the goings on of the senate."

"That depends," Arial said. Her innocent demeanor seemed to melt from her, the sweet innocent stare she perfected belied more than Rillan could have guessed. "What kind of goings on are you interested in."

"I want to find out what a senator does all day."

"That makes no sense. Anyone could tell you that the senators attended meetings all day. You must be wanting something more specific than that."

Rillan reached into his purse again and pulled out a denarius. He held it up in front of Arial, watching her eyes focus on the coin. "I guess I am looking for some fairly specific information. And I don't want anyone to know that I'm looking for it."

Arial nodded, staring past the shining golden coin to Rillan's face, the innocence now completely gone from her features. "What do you want to know," she said quietly, reaching for the coin.

Rillan let her get her hand around it, but didn't release it. "I need someone who can tell me what Tiberius Caelius Novanus does day and night. Who he's with. Where he goes."

"You need a member of his personal staff. It's not as if that information is secret. If you waited around outside his gates you would see him come and go." Arial sounded almost disappointed that his question hadn't been more interesting. "He leads a fairly public life."

During the day, he thought. Sometimes I hate the sun. More and more often of late. "I don't want to be seen watching him." Rillan started to take the coin out of her hand. "If you can't help me—"

"I know just the person you need," Arial said quickly and snatched the coin out of his hand.

"Bring him here tomorrow night," Rillan said dismissively and started to move so that Arial could leave the room.

Showing no intention of leaving, Arial's eyes focused contemplatively on Rillan. "It's not often that I do this for someone who hasn't paid and demanded it," she whispered.

Confusion was replaced with uncertain regret, as Rillan watched Arial drop to her knees in front of him. She managed to untie his breeches, pull his limp member from his pants and wrap her lips around it, before he knew what was happening. *Either I'm getting slow or my guard was far too low with this one.* "Arial," he hissed, trying to find the right words to stop her without insulting her. His cock, betraying him, responded enthusiastically to Arial's touch.

With the thought process of a philosopher examining the intricate differences between two flowers, he found himself contemplating the differences between Mira's naïve hands and Arial's practiced fingers. Arial's tongue swirled around the head of his cock, tracing the ridge. Her small hands gripped his shaft tightly and stroked the length slowly.

Pulling her mouth from him, Arial licked the tip a couple times as she stroked it. "You're so cold," she whispered.

Rillan took advantage of her having released him from her mouth. "Arial." He reached under her chin and made her look at him. "I have someone. I need you to stop this."

Disappointment filled her eyes, but she released his member from her grip and sat back on her heels. She watched him rearrange himself and tie his breeches securely in place. "You are an unusual man," she said softly. "And whoever she is, I envy her." Arial quickly got to her feet and disappeared through the door, before Rillan could say anything more.

Chapter 8

Nightfall brought a soft knock on Rillan's door. When he opened it, Arial was standing there with a middle-aged, nervous man in a toga. Stepping back, Rillan opened the door as wide as he could in the confined space and allowed them both in.

Arial smiled winningly at Rillan. "This is Sarius. He waits on Tiberius, and his wife works in the kitchens."

With the mention of his wife, Sarius looked a bit smaller. "Well, she used to," he said to the air.

Arial shot Rillan an apologetic gaze. "She's fallen sick. Sarius needs money for the apothecary."

"I'm sorry for your troubles." Rillan felt little sympathy overall. *At least the man has a wife to be sick.* "I pay well, if that's any aid to your cooperation."

"I'll cooperate," Sarius said in a muted voice. "Arial said that all you want to know is what Tiberius does all the time."

Rillan nodded. "That's all." He produced several golden denarii. "As much detail as you can."

Rillan listened carefully as Sarius related the intricacies of a day in the life of Tiberius Caelius Novanus. He looked a bit uncomfortable, when Rillan started asking questions about the number of guards in the house and where they were at night.

Neither Arial nor Sarius was fool enough to not draw some conclusions about why Rillan wanted a daily itinerary, especially after Rillan's questions. Even so, the money was enough to support Sarius' family for the entire year.

"There is one thing that I would add," Sarius said. "Tiberius was a general before he took control in the senate. You ask a great deal about guards. He doesn't have many because he doesn't need them."

"Thank you for that," Rillan replied and added another coin to the pile. "Is there anything else you would add?"

Sarius thought hard to come up with something else that might add another denarius to his payment. Finally he shook his head.

Rillan pressed the coins into Sarius' hands. "I don't think I have to tell you to forget that you were here."

"No. That goes without saying." Sarius took the coins, excused himself, and skulked off into the night, grateful that the ordeal was over.

Arial stayed behind for a short time, but once she established that she wasn't going to be able to bed Rillan, she excused herself.

* * * *

Rillan was beginning to feel the wearying effects of all the travel, day and night. Not to mention the constant nagging longing for Mira. *The woman never leaves my thoughts.* Even now, standing in the shadows of the stone wall surrounding Tiberius' home, all he could think was, *Finish this. Then you can return to her.*

Intently, he watched the windows of Tiberius' domus. The candlelight long since extinguished, Rillan was only waiting now in the hopes that Tiberius would be asleep for the attack. He had dealt with warriors before. It was always more difficult than the standard overfed politician helplessly cowering in a corner.

Impatient for an end to this assignment, Rillan took a deep breath and summoned up his demon. Blood lust ran rampant through his senses. This half revealed in the task at hand. *No remorse*, he told himself. *Do what must be done, because no one else can.*

Crawling from one shadow to the next, Rillan slid easily up to the domus. He scaled the wall and crept on his stomach along the burnt orange tiled roof. Laying along the edge of the roof, he scanned the courtyard and garden for people. A large statue of a man, presumably Tiberius, dominated the center of the courtyard. Intricate mosaics made up the walkways throughout the courtyard garden. Lanterns illuminated the courtyard, fighting out the night even in the absence of people, illustrating the decadence of the household.

The shadows within the peristyle insisted that Rillan be cautious. He listened for breathing or movement, waiting long moments patiently. After having established no one was around, he lowered himself into the courtyard. Slinking beneath the overhang, past the columns, Rillan melted into the shadows of the peristyle and followed the extravagant mosaics past the kitchen and latrine into the atrium. He counted doors along the wall, until he came to the one that Sarius had indicated belonged to Tiberius.

With a practiced hand, Rillan lifted the latch and slowly pushed the door open. As small and rancid as his room at the inn was, this room was spacious and fragrant. Incense burned somewhere in the darkness. There was a sitting area with several large chairs. Columns acted as the divider between the entrance and the chairs and the bed chamber.

Spying the mounded blankets on the large bed, Rillan moved through the darkness to the bedside. As he reached the piled blankets, he knew something was wrong. He heard no breathing, smelled no blood or sweat. *No human is that clean*, he thought.

Rillan sensed the attack, just as a wicked spatha sliced through the air and bit into the mattress, sending a cloud of soft down into the air. Instinctually, Rillan sank into the shadows. Moving faster than Tiberius' eye could follow, he scaled a column and watched the man search for him from the darkness.

"Rillan ap Tiernay," Tiberius said with grudging awe and respect. "Vampire assassin. I wondered when you would come for me." Tiberius held his spatha lightly in his hand, as he cautiously searched the shadows, careful not to let his guard falter. "I was told not to take this domus. The senate believes it cursed. Do you have any idea how many druids I had to interrogate before I found out what demon they commanded?"

Rillan knew that Tiberius was taunting him with intent. The man moved as if he was more than familiar with the weapon in his hand, and he was confident enough in his abilities that he chose not to call his guard to his aid. Rillan decided to watch a bit longer. The man had earned some respect.

Tiberius shifted his search from the large deep shadows to search the less obvious possibilities. "There are legends still told about you," he spoke into the darkness. "Stories about the great warrior Northman who held back our armies for years before vanishing. What was it? The destruction of your army? The death of your family?"

Tiberius was taking it too far. Rillan could feel the anger edging him closer to attack. He didn't care about the cost at this point. He knew that he couldn't be defeated. *The Fates will never bless me with an easy or honorable death.*

"As I understand it," Tiberius continued, as he exhausted the possible hiding places on the ground and turned his eyes toward the ceiling. "You were given the choice between joining our cause or seeing the death of your wife and child. You chose to watch them die. How does it feel to hold your ideals so high as to make that kind of sacrifice?"

Tiberius' words summoned up images in Rillan's mind of his wife and daughter consumed in the fire that destroyed his home and life. He could still hear the screams, as he was forced to watch them burned alive. Their horrified cries failing to the crackling of the blaze, the executioners held him there long enough to see the flesh charred and fall ashen from their bones. Anguish and misery hazed his senses, and Rillan fell upon Tiberius.

Drawing his falcata, Rillan lunged haphazardly at his target, anger blurring his reason. Tiberius crouched back, as he whirled to face the vampire. He was in no way prepared for what he saw coming at him. Translucent skin pulled taught against his skull, sunken black eyeless sockets stared into him, and lips drawn back in a sneer revealed dozens of dagger like teeth protruding manically from a mouth too large for his face. Tiberius lost all ability to speak or think, as he stared entranced at the monster descending upon him.

Lifting his curved blade, Rillan aimed for Tiberius' skull. At the last minute Tiberius recovered enough sense to thrust his spatha up into Rillan's stomach. The

falcata slashed through flesh and bone from Tiberius' shoulder, through his chest and across his stomach. Rillan released his weapon and staggered back. Blood sprayed from the sliced artery in Tiberius' neck and dribbled from his mouth, down his chin. Looking down, Tiberius saw his intestines spill out of his opened stomach, and he collapsed on the floor.

Rillan held the sword lodged in his own stomach. Thick, dark, brown-red blood oozed out around the blade. Taking hold of the hilt, he pulled the sword out, only barely stifling a painful moan. Rillan stared at the gaping wound in his stomach, knowing that he wasn't strong enough to heal without fresh blood. The vampire looked to Tiberius momentarily, before turning away in disgust. *I'll lie down and turn to dust first.*

Rillan managed to force the demon under control. He knew that it would be easier to blend in and escape as a human. Still, the compulsion was already taking hold of him. *Blood lust.* His mind raged. *Mira.* The thought of her forced the vampire down. He had just enough sense left to know that it was nearing dawn, and he couldn't travel during the day like this.

Warm copper tainted the air Rillan breathed. Heat seeped through the sole of his soft leather boots. Looking down Rillan watched red pooling around his feet. Without another thought, he walked out of the room, as if he was walking down a hallway in his own home. A small child emerged from the latrine as Rillan passed, wordlessly down the hall. The little boy followed him a few feet, before looking down and seeing the bloody footprints Rillan was leaving behind. Rillan could hear the child's cries echoing through the peristyle, as he swung himself up onto the roof and clumsily dragged himself over the apex and down the other side.

The inn seemed to be days away. Rillan stumbled through the streets. Coming to the front door of the inn, he found it bolted. Arial was the one who answered his pounding.

“Are you insane? You’ll wake the whole inn. An accomplishment, considering most of them are passed out.” Arial stood aside to let him in, and then bolted the door behind him.

Cloak wrapped around himself, Rillan lurched across the main room without stopping for pleasantries.

Arial rushed up beside him and pulled his arm over her shoulders to help him. “By the Fates, what have you done,” she hissed under her breath. Her eyes never leaving his blood stained boots. Fear spurred, Arial virtually dragged Rillan across the main room, out the back door, through the courtyard and into his room. Helping him onto the bed, she stood wringing her hands and staring at him. “You’ll get us all disemboweled. You can’t stay here.”

Rillan sat hunched over on the bed, holding his stomach. Only barely hearing Arial through the ringing in his ears, it took all his willpower to remain in control and not take what he needed from her. “No one knows I’m here save you and your friend. Assuming you both keep it to yourselves, there should be no trouble. I’ll leave come nightfall. Now get out of here.” He lay back on the bed, and his cloak fell open.

Arial’s eyes widened and panic turned her stomach. “You’re hurt!” She went to his bedside and untucked his shirt from his breeches to get a closer look at the gaping wound in his stomach.

Her heart raced, and Rillan could hear each beat as if a drum was pounding in his head. "Stop." Rillan grabbed her wrists and pushed her away from himself. "Get out!"

"I can't," Arial cried in a trembling voice. "If you die here, I don't know what I'll do with the body."

Rillan smiled and coughed out a low demonic laugh. "And here I thought you cared," he said sarcastically. He could feel his control slipping. Laying back on the flea infested pillow, he closed his eyes, knowing that they were already shifting. "You need to leave now. I'll not tell you again."

"Fucking fool," she spat at him, as she walked to his bedside again. "Take my help. Who cares why I give it." Arial finished pulling his shirt from his breeches. Looking at the wound she thought she may be losing her mind. It wasn't actually bleeding. There was a vicious gaping hole in his stomach. His shirt was stained with thick, red-brown ooze that obviously came from the wound. She would never expect any man to be able to walk around with an injury like this, and she had never seen a wound like this before. Suddenly, Arial felt incredibly uneasy. *He should be dead*, she thought. *That doesn't even really look like blood*. Slowly, gently she placed the shirt back over Rillan's wound. "Maybe you're right. I should go," she said nervously. Something in her was screaming, *turn and run!*

The vampire watched the girl finally start to understand. A wicked smile pulled thin pale lips back from dozens of protruding dagger-like fangs. "I suppose," Rillan started in a guttural, low voice, "it's just as well you stayed. You'll make my walk home much easier."

Reluctantly Arial raised her eyes to the face of the creature speaking to her. Her chest immediately constricted on her lungs. She had no breath to scream. Terror held her in one spot, as he approached her. Rillan stood, his face inches from hers. "You smell tainted whore. Too many nights in the beds of scum for a pretty silver coin." Leaning even closer, his nose in her hair, he drew in a deep tormenting breath. "Still you'll do."

Whimpering, Arial stood still, while the monster taunted her. Tears formed in her unblinking eyes and overflowed down her cheek. A snake-like tongue slid out of Rillan's mouth and licked the salty drop from her face.

"You should have left when I gave you the chance," Rillan whispered, in a regretful tone that only confused Arial. *I don't need to feed this badly*, his mind warred with his instinct, but his drive for self preservation was too strong.

A clawed hand grasped Arial's sarong and ripped it off her body, spilling coins across the floor and revealing her naked pale flesh. He ran claws along her soft white skin, along her side and across her breast. Tears streamed down her face, dripping off her jaw and splashing on her chest and breasts. *Take her or let her go*, he told himself. *Torture is not necessary*. He took a deep breath trying to control his inner beast. *She knows what I did and what I am. I can't let her go*.

With that resolution firm in his mind, Rillan grabbed her arms, pulled her body against his and bit down on her neck. Fangs tore into flesh, thick warm blood rushed into his mouth with each heartbeat, and he listened with satisfaction as her breathing slowed. To some extent, he didn't realize how hungry he was. Her body drained in moments.

High on the adrenalin rush from blood saturated in fear, Rillan tossed her body aside. *Rest. I need rest.* Compulsively turning back to the bed, he crawled across it. The vampire retreated to the recesses of his mind, and Rillan felt the guilt begin. He closed his eyes, letting his exhaustion take him. His body began knitting itself together, while images of terror filled eyes stared accusingly at him from the inside of his eyelids.

Chapter 9

Rillan woke to the distinct odor of rotting flesh. It wasn't quite strong enough that a human would catch it, but it was more than enough to turn his stomach. Scowling and holding his breath, he sat up on his bed. *Did some animal fall down the shaft and die on my floor?*

His eyes took longer than usual to adjust to the pitch black around him. *Where am I?* Lifting his hands from the bug infested mattress he was sitting on, Rillan slowly took in his unfamiliar surroundings. *I must be on assignment*, he thought calmly. It wasn't the first time he had been wounded and lost some of his recent memory. It would all come back to him. That small reassurance wasn't much consolation to his conscience, when he saw the crumpled form in the corner. Horror, like nothing he had ever felt before, crept beneath his skin and crawled through his body, as he stared at the form.

"Mira?" The whisper sounded like a scream in his mind. In a flash, Rillan was next to the dead girl on the floor and lifting her to see her face. "Arial," Rillan breathed in relief, then dropped the cold desiccated corpse to the filthy floor.

Painfully, memories flooded Rillan's mind. He knew they would. Closing his eyes, Rillan slumped against the wall and let the torrent overcome him. He remembered assassinating his target, the boy in the woods, and killing Arial. "You should have listened to me girl," he said to the air.

It was taking more effort than usual for him to turn the guilt off. *This is what I am.*

Rillan heard the shuffling footsteps coming before the heavy knock on the door echoed off the walls. It could have been the inn keeper looking for money or the girl.

Rillan didn't stick around to find out. Before the door opened, he was out the window and vanishing into the darkness of an overcast moonless night. Whether it was the missing moon or his mood, the shadows seemed deeper than usual.

With the sounds, smells, and lights of Noviodunum far behind him, Rillan slowed his pace. He took his time finding a shelter for the day. The events surrounding this assignment weighed on him more than he was willing to consciously think about. He found himself finding ways to delay his journey home. Visions of a lifeless form lying in his arms plagued Rillan's thoughts and dreams, staring up at him with Mira's eyes.

* * * *

Destructive crashing and the sound of splintering wood echoed down the hallway and stopped Mira from opening the library door. Holding the lantern high in the air and staring off down the endless hallway, she called out weakly, "Hello?"

Uncertain fear balled in the pit of her stomach. Logically, Mira knew that no one else dared venture into the catacombs which she now called home. Even so, Rillan's absence caused her mind to run wild with every odd sound. At least she knew what the monster in the shadows was when Rillan was home. Now, with Rillan away on his assignment, the unknown was somehow more frightening than he ever was. Not to mention the possibility of his return and what that might bring.

I never realized how scary this place could be, she thought. An amused grin split her face, momentarily defeating her fears. *I wouldn't have thought I could come to be this comfortable here.* Just then the destructive sounds returned, and her grin faded. *Maybe Rillan's back,* she reassured herself, knowing that the noises couldn't possibly be him.

Mira tiptoed down the hall toward the noise. *Just go see that it's nothing so that you'll be able to sleep tonight*, she told herself. She wasn't positive where the sound came from. Walking down the hall, she shortly found herself at an unfamiliar t-section. *I guess I didn't realize how much of the cavern there is, beyond the small area that I tend to stay in. I suppose there have to be quite a few things going on in this place that I really don't know much about. It's not as if Rillan and I ever talk about anything important.*

Letting her mind wander a bit, so that she would stop thinking so hard about what could have made the sound Mira peered down one dark hallway and then the other, trying to decide which way she should go. Suddenly another crash, nearby and off to her right, made her jump out of her skin.

Dropping the lantern, Mira nearly ran back. Light spilled across the floor and down the hallway. "Hello," she whispered into the black and was answered with another crash. Gathering all her courage, Mira strode in mock determination toward the sound.

When a gentle breeze lifted her hair, Mira stopped dead. *The only way a breeze can get in here is through another shaft or maybe the cave entrance. That's back the other way, I think.* Suddenly more curious than frightened, Mira followed the breeze. As she reached the perimeter of the fading lantern light, another crashing sound assaulted her senses, and she fell back a couple steps.

She could barely make out the shape of a door along the cave wall. She stood mesmerized, frozen in place and watching for any sign of movement. Soft yellow light began to peek around the edges of the door. Shifting and faltering as if someone was moving it, the light slowly became brighter. Mira unconsciously stepped back into the

protective shadows, awestruck by the prospect that someone was breaking in to a vampire's lair. *Who could possibly be that foolish?*

Gradually the door began to creak open, and Mira stared wide eyed at the figure appearing, poking his head out into the hallway. All of Mira's fear and anxiety melted and was quickly replaced by pleased bewilderment. "Liam?"

The blonde man jumped, as though he had been ambushed by a ghost. He drew a short blade from his belt, jerked the lantern up over his head, throwing light across the hall and brandished the weapon.

"Liam," Mira insisted accusingly. "What are you doing here?" Without another thought, she rushed across the hall and threw her arms around the man's neck, hugging him warmly. "How did you get in here?"

Breathing a long sigh of obvious relief Liam hugged her back, burying his head in her hair briefly, before pushing her away. "There really isn't time. I should have gotten here sooner. It took too much work to arrange things, and then it was a lot harder to find a connecting tunnel than I thought I would be." Liam seemed to be talking more to himself than Mira and glancing nervously one way, then the other around the tunnels. "Come on, he could be back any time now." Liam grabbed Mira's hand and started to pull her into the room he emerged from.

Shock and confusion allowed Liam to guide Mira into the room and up to the debris he had created, before she gripped his hand more tightly and stopped him. "Liam, what's going on?"

Mira gazed around the room in astonishment. It looked as though it was some kind of store room. The stone wall at the back of the room had a heavy wooden door.

Carved symbols of the dead had been splintered and mutilated during Liam's forced entry. "Liam? What is this?"

He was staring at her face and neck with an apprehensive grimace. "I've come to take you out of here."

"You can't." Mira pulled her hand out of his and started to back away from Liam.

"Mira, they know. Tiberius found out about us, about what the elders have been doing, about the vampire. It shouldn't be coming back. If it does come back, do you really want to still be here?" Liam couldn't believe how pale she was, even in lantern light, or how thin. *It certainly doesn't take him long to destroy them*, he thought in disgust. "I'll take care of you Mira. Come with me." He held out his hand to her.

Mira shied away and shook her head. "Liam I can't. You know I can't. How did you get in here? Where does that lead?" She pointed to the hole in the wall.

Liam looked back over his shoulder at the hole in the wall, a guilty and pained expression contorting his face. "The tombs," he almost whispered.

Mira's eyes opened wide in horror. "You disturb the dead. What will the elders think of that?"

"They don't need to know," he snapped. "No one ever ventures that deeply into the tombs." Liam stared fearfully into the darkness of a nearby shadow that seemed to be moving.

Then no one should ever discover your body, Rillan thought. He wasn't entirely sure why he hadn't attacked the fool already. Somewhere in the back of his mind, tearing him apart, a voice was saying, *Just go with him Mira*. Rillan held himself to the

shadows, waiting to see how the situation would play out, indecision virtually splitting him in two.

“Mira, please,” Liam begged, never taking his eyes from the darkness surrounding them. He half expected the black to come to life and swallow him whole. “If you could see how you look,” he whispered.

A tear formed in Mira’s eye. “I know how I look. I’ve buried enough of my predecessors. You don’t need to remind me of it. Go home Liam. I have my duty here.” Mira turned away from him and started to walk back down the tunnel.

“I’m sorry,” Liam called after her, as he followed. “Mira I can’t go without you. Please understand. This era is over. I—” Liam swallowed hard. “Please Mira, I love you.”

She stopped in the hall and turned to face him. “Liam, you never said.”

“We always knew what you were destined for. There was never a point before now.”

Mira shook her head. “You can’t love me. It’s impossible. This is how my life was meant to be.”

“No,” Liam insisted, “it isn’t. No one has to die for this. We can resolve our wars with words. We don’t need assassins. At least that’s what the elders are deliberating.”

There was a long moment, as Mira considered everything she had just learned. “We’ll see. I can’t leave here. Not now. I’ll wait for my orders from the elders. Go home Liam. I’m sorry you love me.”

Liam felt as though his entire world was collapsing around his feet. Mira took a couple steps away from him and then turned to run down the hall and return to her

rooms. Liam watched her go as long as he could still see her form moving in the darkness. Then she was gone. From somewhere in the moving black Liam could have sworn he heard raspy breathing, or maybe a growl.

Devastated, he slunk from the tunnels and walked out the hole in the wall he created. He stared weakly at the destructive mess he and his brother made of the tomb. Something in him didn't care any longer.

Completely forgetting the original reason she left her rooms, Mira sat down on her bed. Tears rolled over her cheeks. She couldn't decide if she was proud of herself for staying or if she thought that she was stupid. *I couldn't do that to Rillan. I just couldn't. I'll keep my word.* She lay down on her bed crying. *Why didn't I ever realize that about Liam before?*

Rillan sneered. Visions ran through his mind of ripping the man's tongue out and using it to write a bloody warning on the wall for all other would be rescuers. Instead Rillan allowed the broken man to leave. More than anything, he envied the life that the man was able to offer Mira. *She should have gone with him.*

Walking through the gloom of the tunnels toward his rooms, Rillan considered the things that Mira's suitor said. *I don't know whether I'm happy about becoming unnecessary or not. I can't believe she chose to stay.*

Upon entering his rooms, he went straight to his bed and lay down. Rillan didn't bother removing clothing, he was too exhausted. Closing his eyes, all he could see were visions of his past and speculation on the future. The worst of the visions were the ones involving Mira and what he was doing to her.

Standing over Mira's bed Rillan stared down at her withered naked body. He parted her legs and stepped up to her. Claws dug into her hips as he gripped her and thrust deeply into her. Drops of blood formed at his fingertip as he fucked her lifeless form. She barely managed to squeak out a soft protest. Her body was too far gone to handle much more.

As Rillan plunged into her tiny frame he watched her body disintegrating in his hands, her pale skin graying and turning to dust. She lay there beneath him moaning softly with his movements, loving him through the pain and death.

A soft breeze filtered through the room from the shaft and slowly skimmed the layer of dust that was her skin. Horror sifted through Rillan's body as Mira's body eroded before his eyes and was gone, leaving a gray silt to cover everything in the room.

Sitting bolt upright in bed Rillan took a moment to register the feelings that were surging through him. It had been at least a century since the last time he felt fear, dread, or guilt.

Rillan stood and began pacing, the cold sweat on his clammy skin drying with the movement. *What am I supposed to do? I've spent the whole of my life as a martyr. Why the hell should I do it again? Haven't I earned some happiness after all I've done?*

A vision of Arial crumpled against the wall of that dirty room in Noviodunum propelled him to his desk. Spreading parchment out in front of him and putting pen to the paper he wrote out instructions for the elders, in detail, berating them for the poor preparation of the girls who had been sent to him over the years.

I hope that this seems a viable reason to send her back to them. A teary glaze coated his eyes, but he blinked it away and sealed the letter in an envelope. Forcing himself to action before his resolve broke, he charged down the hall toward Mira's room.

Mira woke to noisy shuffling about her room. Sudden fear shot through her.
Either Rillan is home or Liam has returned. The fool is persistent enough.

"Get up," Rillan growled. "I know you're awake."

Relief flooded Mira's body, once she heard what sounded to be the normal abrasive Rillan. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were home."

"Just get up," he responded and grabbed her arm, dragging her to a standing position. Then he shoved a bag into her hands.

"What's this?" Mira opened the large bag and looked in.

"The things you can take with you," he said angrily.

"I don't understand."

"You're leaving. Come with me."

"What do you mean?" *By the Fates, I hope he didn't find out about Liam.*

"I'm done with you. I have a letter for the elders. You're returning to the village. Deliver it," Rillan said shortly. He was afraid he may break down and cry. He didn't want her to attempt to stay behind. *I had to fall in love with her.*

Mira stared at him in shock and dismay. "Did I do something wrong?"

The pitiful tone in her voice almost broke his resolve. "Be glad that I'm not draining you dry and leaving you for dead. I need someone younger. You're more work than I care to deal with girl."

A knot began to form in her stomach. "What's wrong? Are you hungry?" Assuming that his strange behavior had to do with his assignment, Mira began to undress.

Knowing that he wouldn't be able to go through with forcing her out if he made love to her, or even touched her again, Rillan grabbed Mira by the arm and began to pull her bodily from the room, before she could get out of any of her clothes. "I told you that I'm done with you," he spat at her. "Have them send someone else. That's all."

"You're hurting," Mira whimpered as she tried to pry his hand off her arm. "You're not making sense."

He dragged her, amidst numerous protests to the cave mouth. "You have a new purpose Mira. Correct your elder's teachings. I expect the girls sent to me in future to be better prepared for what they will face at my hands. You return here, I'll kill you," was the last thing he said to her, before leaving her confused and bruised form on the ground at the cave mouth.

Letter in hand, Mira watched Rillan disappear into the bleak darkness that was his home. Soft blue light kissed the sky above the trees. *Dawn*. Near awe, Mira watched the sky slowly lighten, no cave walls, no cave ceiling separating her from the sight. The tears in her eyes took on a new meaning, as she felt more than watched the morning creep into the clearing around her. Creaking of the rusted iron gate drew her attention from the beauty of the coming morning.

Mira looked toward the gate to see a young girl staring at her, mouth agape, wide-eyed. When she saw Mira turn toward her, she flinched, dropped the armful of supplies she held, then turned and ran back out the gate.

"I wonder how I would have reacted if I had found one of the sacrifices outside the cave when I was a novice," Mira asked herself. Standing, Mira brushed herself off turning toward the darkness in the cave. Tears started again, she felt as though her heart had been ripped out. *I wonder what I did wrong. This can't be right. He'll come back. He needs me.*

Clutching the letter in one hand, Mira stood at the cave mouth waiting. She wasn't sure how long she had been there, when a hand on her shoulder drew her attention. Dazed, Mira turned to see an elderly woman's kind eyes bearing down on her. Nothing seemed to be making sense. Somewhere in the back of her mind Mira recognized the woman as Lilith. She was the oldest of the elders and a kind soul.

First Liam breaks into the tombs, and then Rillan throws me out. The sacrifices don't work like this. Mira was tired. She didn't know what to think about any of it. Slowly she lifted the paper up for Lilith to take. Rillan hadn't said who to give it to, but Lilith seemed to be an intelligent option.

Taking the letter from Mira, Lilith ran concerned eyes over Mira. She had the look of all the sacrifices, withered and pale. Dark circles sharply contrasted her pallor, around sunken eyes that were far too bright with understanding things no one should ever have to know.

Lilith unceremoniously broke the seal on the letter and unfolded the parchment. She read slowly and carefully, seeing more in Rillan's writing than he truly intended to be understood about his motivations for sending Mira back to them.

Clearing her voice, Lilith refolded the paper and looked sympathetically to Mira. "So it seems you are to be our new teacher, in the wake of our inadequacies in dealing with our guardian."

"I guess," Mira responded meekly, a small quake in her voice. Tears still wet on her face, Mira looked back to the darkness of the cave, but Rillan was gone. *Strange that the darkness should almost seem more welcoming than the light and the pitying stares*, she thought bitterly.

Nodding, Lilith turned to a couple of the young onlookers and gave instructions that didn't quite register in Mira's mind. She gazed longingly into the cave mouth, wishing Rillan would change his mind and come back for her. Finally she allowed herself to be guided away from the cave and taken to the village.

By the time they reached the round houses, people had gathered to see the living sacrifice. No one ever walked out of that cave alive, and there was concern that something was wrong. Wild speculation whispered from one ear to the next.

"Maybe she ran away."

"Well if she did, does that mean he'll come out here hunting her down?"

"Do you think we're in danger?"

"No one could run away from that. She must have done something to anger him, and he got rid of her."

"No. He would have killed her."

"Well there's no way he would have let her leave."

"She doesn't even look happy to have survived."

"She looks like walking death."

"I wonder what it was like in there."

"Judging from her appearance, there's no way it could have been good."

"What do you think we're going to do now? Send another sacrifice?"

"Lilith will know."

"She always knows."

"I thought we were getting rid of him anyway."

"Don't believe all the rumors."

Chapter 10

Pacing his room, Rillan simply couldn't put himself at ease. Each time he lay down and closed his eyes with the intent of sleep, he heard the soft notes of Mira's silver whistle echoing down the hall. When he rose to see where the sound was coming from, there was nothing. It didn't surprise him that it was a dream. He had been adamantly clear about the druids sending a new girl and keeping Mira with them. Considering that they spent the last few centuries doing exactly as he told them. It would make no sense for them to go against his wishes now.

A sudden wave of frustration coursed through him. He grabbed the corner of the nearest piece of furniture and threw it across the room. The heavy wooden desk crashed into the wall as if it were a toy. Parchment, pens, a few books, and various other random items, scattered haphazardly across the floor. Charging out of the room, he went to the large main chamber at the end of the hall.

Rillan stripped to his breeches, tearing fabric in his rage. Grabbing his falcata from the rack where he left it, he began pummeling his practice dummy into submission. At great length he found himself tired, but no less frustrated.

With only slightly more control, Rillan began gathering his clothes together. *I'll take a bath. Maybe I'm tired enough to fall asleep finally. Or at least I should start considering the possibility that my existence may be in danger. If Mira's would-be rescuer was right, then I'm about to become obsolete, or at least a bargaining chip. The way the druids work, it's hard to guess which direction the wind may blow them.*

As Rillan gathered his tattered clothing and tried to force his brain to consider something other than Mira, a soft clatter followed by a rolling sound broke his train of

thought. His sharp eyes caught movement, and he realized that the last time he wore his now shredded tunic was when he assassinated Tiberius. He turned and watched the tiny black bead roll across the floor and deftly sneak through the metal work on the fire screen. The small black pearl he found rolled to a stop in the ash beneath the grate in the fireplace.

Rillan's thoughts turned toward Mira again. Kneeling in front of the nearly burned out fire and moving the heavy metal screen, he plucked the pearl up from the hearth. A rush of inspiration took hold of him. Dropping his clothes, Rillan hurried back to his room. He ignored the splintered wood that had been his desk and shuffled through the mess on the floor, to get to a chest at the foot of his bed.

It had been so long since he opened it that the latch was rusted shut. Even so, it didn't take much effort for him to force it open. Inside the chest, he sifted through treasures of a previous life: the tunic he wore when he was married, a dagger given to him by his father, a small wooden carving of a dog from his childhood, a pressed dry flower that his daughter had given him before she died, the manuscript that contained all the information the druids had used in creating him, even the information left out of the papers in the library... He had nearly forgotten what all he kept in the chest. Finally he found it. A small pewter rose pendant. His mother had worn it on special occasions.

Taking the pendant from the chest, he turned it over and over in his hands. Though heavily tarnished and needing a new chain, it would do.. Smiling to himself he took it down the hall to the room he used when he needed to repair his armor. It wasn't a forge by any means, but it worked for small jobs. He had a few tools and an anvil.

This would require more finesse though. He wanted to remove the small white pearl from the center and replace it with the black one he found.

Strange how even dark things can be beautiful, Rillan thought, as he contemplated how to go about his task. *Strangely perfect. I can keep my mother's pearl. And I think she would approve.*

* * * *

"Mira?" Liam watched her squinting at the sky, seemingly bothered that the sun was out. He tried for days to get her to leave her small room in the house the sacrifices were kept in.

Looking a little dazed, Mira turned to him. "Did you say something Liam?"

The expression on his face was more than a little hurt. "Yes," he said softly. "Did you really not hear me?"

Suddenly it sunk in. Mira stared at him for a long time before she spoke. "No, I heard you. Are you serious?"

His hurt expression worsened. "Mira, I guess maybe I thought-- I don't know what I thought. Never mind." Liam turned away from her and began walking. He didn't care where he was going as long as it was away from her.

Overwhelmed with guilt over Rillan, now this was too much. *Handfasted to Liam? What else is there for me now? I thought I knew my purpose. I've been wrong about so many things.* "Liam," Mira called after him and ran to catch up.

He didn't know if he should stop or not. The last thing he wanted to do was discuss being ignored during his proposal.

“Liam, okay,” Mira announced to his back. “I’m sorry I was distracted. I never expected to ever be handfasted to anyone. I-- accept.”

Turning back around a small, uncertain smile touched his lips. “I’ll bring you back to us, Mira. I promise. You spent too much time in the dark. It got into your head. *He* got into your head. You’ll see. It’ll be alright.” Liam wrapped her in his arms and held Mira’s tiny frame carefully. “First we’re going to get you something more to eat,” he said gently.

Mira stared at the people passing by, while Liam hugged her. She couldn’t help feeling that this wasn’t right. *You just don’t know what right is anymore*, she told herself. *Liam is a good man. He loves you. This will work.*

* * * *

The senate chamber at Noviodunum rumbled with indecisiveness and conspiracy. No one knew who would replace Tiberius Caelius Novanus. There were several men in the running, none of whom were from the Novanus family.

“It’s about time,” a voice whispered.

“How long have they controlled the senate?”

“Far too long.”

“Perhaps the troops will be called home.”

“I haven’t seen my brother in over a decade.”

“Who cares how it happened. Next time, pay the druids to get rid of the tyrant sooner.”

The hushed exchanges ended to the clacking of a ring on the arm of a large intricately carved wooden chair at the head of the room. No one dared call it a throne

out loud when Tiberius had the gall to place it at the head of the room. There was still some concern as to whether it would stay or go. That would depend on who took Tiberius' place. The short stout man in a long embroidered toga, who had been clacking the ring on the chair arm, stood and called for order. "Enough, enough," his voice carried over the room. The entire chamber had been designed to be acoustically perfect in carved marble, and the man at the head of the room sounded as though he was next to each member of the senate as he spoke.

Once he was satisfied that all eyes were on his portly frame Senator Torum continued. "Arrangements for the funeral pyre are to be handled at the discretion of the Novanus family. Further information, to be announced as needed. Over the next few days we will hear from the various men who believe they would be fit to fill the deceased's place in our forum. Elections to be held at the completion of the debates."

Senator Torum continued to drone on at length covering all the daily business. He started with a movement to lower the taxes on an area of the Empire that had recently been devastated by a storm. He followed that with rescue efforts to move food into the region. All the while, a weaselly looking man in a tunic which didn't fall quite right on his frame, stood by impatiently. Each time Senator Torum brought an end to a mundane affair of state, the weaselly guy stood hopefully taller in his place, only to slump back again when the new topic wasn't what he was waiting for.

"Last order of business," Torum announced with finality, and in a tone which told all in attendance he was not happy with the upcoming information. "We have with us a delegate from the druid settlements. I believe he has the backing of the Novanus representative?" Torum looked to a teary eyed woman who nodded emphatically.

Several young men who had the distinct Novanus jaw line glared at Torum. Smiling at the young men authoritatively, the senator returned his attention to the assemblage.

Senator Torum turned toward the eager man, "Your name sir?"

"Darius ap Jos. If it please the senate," he said with a bowed head. There was a soft rumble through the room. Men shifted positions to get a look at the new speaker. "I have come to the senate with disturbing news at the bequest of the Novanus family. I was sent to Noviodunum as a representative of my people with good intent. Over time I have come to see Noviodunum as more of a home to me than my own lands. Here the Novanus family took me in and conducted business in good faith with my people for several years. It disturbed me to find that the assassination called down on the mighty head of their family be at the hands of the very people who sent me here to befriend him."

With the announcement, an amused murmur circulated amongst the crowd.

"What's the fool up to?"

"Does he believe he brings us news?"

"What does he want?"

Darius cleared his throat to call attention again. He expected his words to have more impact than it appeared. Tiberius' sons growled impatiently. *At least I have the family behind me.* "I would ask that the Senate send me back to my people with the aid of the army. At that time, I would bring to an end the Circle's ungodly practices and bring the druidic peoples under Empire protection."

A soft chuckle circulated, as the Senate realized what exactly Darius was up to. A balding man in a richly embroidered toga stepped forward. He was one of the men

vying for Tiberius' recently vacant position. His mere presence brought a hush to the bemused crowd. "Darius, is it? Did you not hear the list of concerns that were put forth by Senator Torum before you? The settlements you speak of have been a bane in our existence for over a century. The people there do not want Empire rule, and we are stretched to the limit of our resources to control what we have. Not to mention our concern with containing the war that is coming from other borders. Why would we want to expend troops on attacking a border too far to be profitable and currently causing no trouble?" As approval from the crowd rumbled agreement with the statement, the man continued with a pleased smile. "There is no logic to starting a war on an additional front."

One of the young Novanus charged forward. "What was my father to you, Gaius?"

The well dressed senator glared down at the young man. "Your father was a mighty general, Marcus. He expanded our borders, as his father did before him."

A voice from an unseen listener added, "Sometimes at the expense of internal affairs."

Gaius cleared his throat loudly, stifling the angry murmur of agreement that was threatening to start the rest of the Novanus boys adding to the argument. Attempting to quell the boy's anger, he tried to continue his diplomatic approach to the situation. "As, no doubt, you will too some day. If given the opportunity. However, even your father was aware of our current resources and our abilities." The senator turned away from the angry young man.

Darius stepped in front of Marcus Novanus, placing a hand on his chest and nodding to him for permission to speak. Marcus stepped back and moved to console his sobbing mother.

“Senator, must I remind the senate that the Circle possesses knowledge that could greatly aid any army in times of war. The information which could be gleaned from a cooperative Circle I believe you may find, could turn the tides in a failing war or even aid the communities so devastated by the storms you were referring to earlier. There are reasons that your people have been attempting to assimilate my culture for so long.”

The men in the room began murmuring again.

“Who does the fool think he’s dealing with?”

“Wasn’t it already established that the rumors of druid magic were false?”

“Their fake Gods hold no power we can use.”

“But what if we’re wrong?”

“Is it possible they’ve hidden something from us?”

“There are rumors that the assassin was a vampire.”

“No such thing.”

“But what if?”

Gaius took a turn clacking his ring on the arm of the chair. It took some time for the crowd to calm down, and Darius looked far too pleased with the obvious uproar he caused. “Gentlemen.” Gaius’ voice carried through the room and finally silence fell. “Last I knew, there was no secret information hidden by the Circle. Darius, perhaps you could provide us some proof of what you claim? Make it rain? Or maybe bring the

dead to life? I know, in the face of all the science we hold dear and the knowledge we possess, which I believe far greater than druid magic rites, perhaps you'll turn this to gold for us?" Gaius pulled a pewter coin from his pocket and tossed it to Darius.

The chuckle that emanated from the various corners of the room told both men that Gaius had made his point to the senators.

Attempting to resurrect what little credit he had gained, Darius continued. "The Circle has long known that the rites would bring about their destruction. The knowledge was hidden from even our own people and is kept by the elders for times they believe it's needed. I don't possess the knowledge myself."

"Then," Gaius suggested, "would it be entirely possible that even you in your wisdom have fallen prey to foolish speculation that a quiet group of people hold more secrets than they could possibly possess?" He grinned at Darius as a father would a small child who needed to be taught a lesson. "I merely find it difficult to believe that the culture would live in poverty if they possessed the kinds of powers you suggest." Gaius turned toward the mourning Novanus family. "I don't wish to add more unhappiness to your life. Please don't let this fool sway your house into an action that would only bring about more misery." Turning toward the senate, he announced in an authoritative voice which reverberated off the walls, "There is no magic to be taken from the druids. They are merely a primitive and impoverished people and this man only wishes to further his own ends. The vote," Gaius shouted into the assembly.

Men all over the room echoed, "The vote!"

"Vote!"

"Cast the vote!"

“Send an army to follow the druid,” Gaius called out.

Darius stood fuming. It was obvious that he would get no further chance to speak. All that time he had wasted on manipulating Tiberius into a position that may have helped him in his goals was wasted. The fool was dead, after having ignored the warnings about the vampire, and his sons were too young and weak to influence the senate. *They have no idea what power the elders keep from us. And they call me the fool.*

Young men in plain white togas carrying richly embroidered red velvet bags circulated amongst the crowd. Men rooted in pockets producing chits that were dropped into the bags. Finally the bags were placed on a large table. Senator Torum approached each bag and upended it with the tips of his fingers. Gold and purple chits spilled across the table. “No count needed. At least 10 to 1 against,” he announced.

An approving rumble enveloped the room.

Darius ap Jos stepped forward, enraged. “You’ll let the Circle assassinate a senator and face no repercussion? You’ll pass up such an opportunity to improve your knowledge and lives?”

“You’re out of order druid,” Gaius growled. “The floor has not recognized you to speak.”

Darius knew the rules of the senate well enough that the tone in Gaius’ voice caused him to back down.

Marcus, the oldest of the Novanus boys stood forward. “If the senate will not send the army then our house sends what troops we have. I would hope that those

loyal to my father may seek to send aid as well. My family retires to our domus. We have plans to draw.”

Darius followed the mourning family out of the senate chambers, his disappointment momentarily abated. *Perhaps this will work out just as well. This way I won't owe any obligation to the senate. A child is easily manipulated.*

“Fool boy,” someone said aloud.

“Let him send his house guard. His estates won't last long without adequate protection.”

“Troops don't work for free.”

“It will be a good lesson for the young Novanus to learn.”

* * * *

Lilith sighed heavily. “And so it comes.”

The runner who brought the news waited patiently to be dismissed.

“A small army is still an army to a people who have none to speak of,” added an old man who sat stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“Agreed,” came another voice.

“But their number is relatively small. Send the vampire.”

They were all thinking it. Speaking the suggestion aloud, however, was a different matter.

“You can go,” Lilith said gently to the now frightened young messenger. “Thank you. Speak to no one.”

The messenger backed hurriedly from the room, nodding emphatically.

"This is not what the vampire was meant for," someone said, as the door closed, returning to the topic at hand.

"Can Tiernay take an army?"

"Is he really that strong?"

"When was the last time anyone, save the girl, saw him or spoke to him?"

"From the looks of Mira, it's not a pleasant task."

"We have no choice."

"Darius brings an army. Small as it may be. We sit and allow him to take control of the Circle, or we attempt to fight back."

"So we gather the men and arm ourselves."

"We're philosophers and farmers. They have armor and swords."

"Words don't shield from steel."

"What if we give them Tiernay?"

"Yes, that may stem their anger. Give them less reason to attack."

"That doesn't mean that they won't still come."

"We'll not know if Tiernay can handle it unless we ask him."

Lilith produced a small piece of parchment paper and began writing in her sweeping script. Everyone stopped and waited for the old woman to finish and speak.

"The elders alone will reconvene tomorrow eve at the entrance to the vampire's cave."

That was all Lilith said. Everyone knew that the debate was ended for now. From nowhere, a young woman appeared at Lilith's side. She took the paper from the old woman's hand and rushed from the room. Rillan would find it that evening, when he checked the basin where his notes were left.

Chapter 11

Liam insisted on a long walk. He insisted on droning on about how wonderful their life was going to be. When he insisted on kissing Mira, she found that just like everything else she had been unable to deny him, kissing was the same.

Gentle hands slid along her body. All around them birds twittered and a soft breeze rustled in the trees. Far off, the sounds of happy people bustling about their work for the day reminded her that she used to believe this was how she had wanted to lose her virginity.

Liam pushed the shoulders of her chemise off and down her arms. As much as she knew she didn't want this, she couldn't bring herself to stop Liam. *This is how it's supposed to be*, her mind raced. *Accept your new life and your new lover.*

Laying Mira down on the soft grass, Liam finished pulling her clothes from her body. She watched, but didn't really see him pushing his breeches down his thighs and kneeling between her bare legs. Liam leaned down and kissed Mira's breast, ran his tongue along the edge of her nipple and then drew it into his mouth. He sucked and licked her nipple at length, trying to draw some kind of response from her.

Between kisses, he worked his hand down her stomach and between her legs. He knew that she was no longer a virgin. The vampire had seen to that. He tried not to be resentful of that fact, as his fingers probed between the soft lips of Mira's sex. Looking up to her face, he found her eyes closed.

"I won't hurt you Mira. Not like he did. I'm going to make love to you."

Determined to replace any terrible memories of what sex should be in her mind, Liam

slid his fingers into her. He stroked her insistently, trying to make her ready for his thick member.

Mira worked hard to turn her mind off. *You have no idea what he did to me*, she thought angrily at him.

Nothing Liam did moistened her slit. No amount of kissing or stroking affected her. She lay there beneath him unmoving, and cold. Finally he gave up on trying and positioned himself to enter her. His pent up desire to have Mira all these years could not be abated, even in the face of her possible discomfort.

Mira winced as he pushed into her unready pussy. His cock felt like it was ripping into her as he pressed unrelentingly on. Finally her natural responses to the situation gave some relief to his aggression, but not enough to bring pleasure or comfort.

Liam thrust into her for what felt like an eternity. His grunting disgusted her, and beads of sweat on his forehead dropped onto her face. She thought he would never finish. Finally he rammed into her several times and his body trembled. Mira felt his hot member throbbing inside her, and then he relaxed.

Panting for breath, Liam rolled off to one side and lay on the ground silent for a few long moments. When he sat up and looked down at her there was a mixture of concern and shame in his eyes beneath his furrowed brow. He helped her up and the two of them dressed in uncomfortable silence.

By the time he took Mira home, the sun was already setting. "Mira, with all the upheaval and distress that has been plaguing our people, a celebration of any kind would be well received."

“So soon?” Mira tried not to sound upset, but knew that she was failing miserably.

“You’ll see.” Liam refused to be put off. She had agreed. Nothing could possibly break his good mood. “I’ll speak with my sisters about helping you,” he added, knowing she had no real family. “And I’m sure if you tell the other girls,” he said, nodding to the curious faces who were watching as he left her on the doorstep of the round house, “you’ll find plenty of other willing hands.”

There was some giggling as the girls realized a secret was being kept.

Liam kissed Mira sweetly on the cheek and disappeared into the night. Mira found it strange that she felt more awake when the sun set than she felt with it up. She couldn’t seem to get her body to go back to living in the sunlight. *All I wanted when I was in his caves was to see outside. Now I have it, and it doesn’t feel right any longer. I wonder how long it will take for me to adjust.*

More girls gathered to see what was going on, now that Mira had returned. She found that she was somewhat of a celebrity. Most of the girls in the current generation of sacrifices knew her before she went into his caves. No one ever expected to see her back alive. When it became clear that he sent her back to train the new generation properly, they all began following her around waiting for her to be ready to start teaching. The elders insisted that the girls leave her alone for the time being. Even so, not being allowed to ask her questions didn’t preclude watching and waiting. They were all curious about what they would face and excited that someone survived. Mira gave them hope.

“What was Liam talking about Mira?” They may not be able to ask about Rillan ap Tiernay, but no one said anything about Liam.

Mira hesitated. Something about actually saying it out loud made her stomach turn a bit. She cleared her throat. “Liam and I are to be handfasted.”

A squeal went up through the room, and the girls began murmuring excitedly. Mira felt as though she was in the middle of a bad dream.

* * * *

Rillan read the note three times; then he read it again. He had never been summoned to a meeting with the elders before. *Whatever their problem is, it must be complex.* There was no hint of the issue to be discussed. Rillan considered, with a grim kind of acceptance and relief, that this could mean the end of this era of his life. *This may be why a new girl hasn’t been sent yet.*

Rillan spent most of the next day taking into account the possibilities that the note and the meeting presented. For the first time in a long while, he was at a loss for the right answer, and there was something oddly nice about that.

Approaching the cave entrance, Rillan could see the druids standing about nervously long before they could see him. Although he never met her, he easily picked out the one who must be Lilith. He had read enough of her notes to know that the woman must be ancient by now. Over the years her handwriting had grown in size and became steadier with each name she wrote. The white haired, wrinkled woman in the plain brown skirt and soft white chemise was the only one not fidgeting.

Rillan walked into the lantern light without hesitation, causing all of the elders to take a step back. He knew that they weren’t expecting what they saw. *Perhaps I*

should have come to them as the demon, he thought sardonically. Rillan held out the note he had received. "My curiosity at this meeting is without bounds."

"Lord Tiernay," one of the men squeaked out.

Grinning at the man, Rillan exposed his fangs, amused when the man flinched. "It's unlikely that I would be anyone else."

"Yes, I suppose—"

"Enough," Lilith said with the exasperation of a woman who obviously wanted to carry on with business. "Lord Tiernay, we currently are faced with a situation we are unsure of. It seems that one of our own has turned to the Empire for assistance in removing the Circle from power. He approaches with an army. Our options are to turn you over and surrender or to find a way to fight them. Unfortunately you are our only line of defense. In order to make the decision as to what we should do next, we need to know if you are capable of fighting a small army."

For a moment Rillan was taken aback. "Of all the reasons I considered which could cause you to call a meeting with me, I must say that I never expected this." He contemplated the situation. "I suppose that my ability to fight this army depends on how much time I have, how many there actually are, and how good they are."

"We have little information save that they are coming."

Rillan nodded. "I would prefer to die fighting, if given the option."

"Understandable. However we have lives to consider," Lilith said. Rillan was impressed with the way she held herself and the bravery with which she spoke to him. "Is there any possibility that you'll attack them and only succeed in angering them so that when they get here we have no protector, and they'll be interested in revenge?"

“I can’t answer that with the little information I have been given. If I only knew numbers, then I would be better able to give you a response.”

“Well we can tell you that the Senate has refused to send the Empire troops. We know that house Novanus and a few loyalists created an army from their house guard. That is what’s coming. But we have no numbers and no way of knowing their skill.”

At that, Rillan smiled wide enough to make the men and women all shift nervously. “That’s it? The Novanus house guard?” Rillan scoffed. “I can handle the house guard. Leave it to me.”

“I need certainty,” Lilith said, leveling a hard look on Rillan that he found to be slightly intimidating.

Either way I would gladly take orders from this woman, he thought. “I know the Novanus house guard and can’t imagine a lesser family in Noviodunum to have better. If that is all they send then there is no army coming. Even so, I would be lying to promise you certainty. You should know that there is no such thing.”

“Well said,” Lilith nodded. “Do you need anything from us before you go?”

Rillan’s eyes swept over the old men and women who were present. “I need to feed.” As he spoke, his eyes momentarily shifted, and the onlookers could almost feel the loathing in his words.

Lilith nodded. “We’ll send a girl come morning.” With a wave of her hand, the elders began backing away and leaving. Finally Lilith stood alone in front of Rillan. Waiting, Rillan couldn’t help wondering what could possibly be left to discuss.

“She is doing well,” Lilith said, gently. She smiled, as she saw realization flash in Rillan’s eyes and discomfort shift his stance. He only nodded back, unsure why Lilith felt the need to tell him anything about Mira. “Well,” Lilith amended. “I guess she’s doing as well as can be expected. She seems lonely and out of place. Still she is trying.”

Concern furrowed Rillan’s brow. “Why should she be lonely? She’s back where she belongs.”

“Why did you return her to us?”

“I sent a note,” he replied angrily.

Lilith smiled knowingly. She had suspected what his real motivations were, regardless of what he had written. A woman doesn’t live as long as she had without being capable of discerning when someone was lying. “I read your note. It just seems strange that you would cope with the girls you’ve been sent for so long and now change your tactics.”

Rillan sneered. “I suppose it makes as much sense as the Circle calling a meeting with me for the first time in centuries.”

Lilith chuckled and nodded. “I guess then it would be fairly safe to say that things are changing.” She sighed. “I marvel that it took as long as it has. The Fates are forever in flux. They almost seemed to have forgotten us.”

“Change isn’t always a good thing,” Rillan replied softly.

“True. However it is a necessary thing.” Lilith moved to leave, as if she was done with the conversation. “And one last thing,” she said over her shoulder. “A martyr

is really only counted as such if he saves someone through his sacrifice. I wonder what you call a man who makes the sacrifice when no one needs to be saved?"

Before Rillan could wrap his brain around what she said, Lilith disappeared into the darkness. She accomplished several feats at once. Rillan had to give her a great deal of credit. He hadn't talked to anyone in a very long time who could stand up to him, confuse him, or impress him, let alone do all three things simultaneously. "The woman must be related to Mira," he growled, but smiled as he returned to his cave. She gave him a great deal to think about.

* * * *

Mira sat unhappily at the breakfast table. She hadn't even finished eating, and her head was already swimming. Liam's sister had arrived first thing and announced that Liam sent her to "help". *Apparently that means take over*, Mira thought. "Listen, Helen, I do appreciate the help," Mira said in between sips on her tea. "But it's not as if this has to happen tomorrow."

The girls all giggled. "Not tomorrow. No. Still Liam wants to have the ceremony within the month. That's still not much time." Helen sat closer to Mira. Her proclamation had the rest of the girls in the room talking excitedly. "My brother has been in love with you for so long. You really don't know how much this means to him. He'll make you happy. You'll see."

"Everyone keeps saying that," Mira whispered despondently.

Helen was taken aback. Liam told her to be prepared for what the vampire had done to Mira. Even so, she hadn't expected the girl to be this bad. It only strengthened her resolve to help. "Don't worry," she said, gently petting Mira's hair. "I'll take care of

everything. Who knows? Perhaps the handfasting could be within a couple weeks.” She looked around at all the listeners encouragingly. “We certainly have plenty of volunteers,” she suggested. With that a squeal of agreement filled the room.

Mira flinched. It was getting almost painful to be awake. Between the sun streaming in the window and the girls squealing, she was developing a vicious headache. Mira reached up absently and started rubbing the join between her neck and shoulder. She didn’t even realize that it was precisely where Rillan had bitten her so many times. She always studiously kept that portion of her neck covered. The scars were horrible. Not that she really minded.

The hush which fell over the room managed to break Mira from her internal monologue long enough to notice that Lilith had come in. Mira was glad and scared to see the woman. As grateful as she was for the calm in the ridiculousness of the morning, Mira could guess what Lilith was here for. She left instructions for a new sacrifice to be chosen, prepared, and sent to Rillan over a week ago. Mira hadn’t been able to bring herself to do it. Now that the rumors about a secret meeting between the elders and Rillan were confirmed, Mira expected he would have reminded them that he needed a new sacrifice. Mira stood up respectfully as Lilith approached.

The old woman smiled sympathetically at Mira. “I rather fancy a walk in the morning air. Come with me Mira.” Without waiting for any kind of response, Lilith led the way out of the round house and away from town, toward the wooded trails. “There’s some privacy this way,” she responded to Mira’s unspoken confusion.

“Can I do something to be of service,” Mira asked.

“You have a strange strength and sadness to your tone, Mira. It’s been a great deal of time since a girl as young as you was able to speak to me without a waver in her voice. But I suppose after facing a terror such as Lord Tiernay, your elders would no longer be as intimidating.”

Mira felt as though she was being baited for some reason. “Rillan isn’t nearly as frightening as we have all been led to believe. He’s merely lonely,” she replied with conviction and annoyance. “Calling him a terror, does him a disservice.” Realizing how she had spoken to Lilith, Mira cleared her throat and added, “With respect Milady.”

Lilith smiled. “There are so many ways to see, Mira. Eyes are only one of those. I am surprised to find that one as young as you would develop the other visions so readily. There is a great destiny for you I think.”

“Yes,” Mira said with tears in her eyes. “Handfasting to Liam.”

“It is a strange woman who can talk about one man with such conviction and yet allow her voice to crack so distinctly in reference to her betrothal.” Mira looked away from Lilith. “I sometimes believe the Fates only keep us around for their own amusement,” Lilith said gently and brushed Mira’s hair from her shoulders. “You need to send a new sacrifice, Mira.”

“I knew that was why you came.”

Lilith sighed, “Choose a girl and begin preparing the next.”

“I shouldn’t worry too much for that. If I begin teaching the girls as they should be, then we should need fewer sacrifices.”

“You truly believe that,” Lilith said in a motherly. “Ah, well, I suppose he believes that too.”

Mira turned toward Lilith in confusion.

Lilith shook her head. "There have always been sacrifices. Even when the lessons were as thorough as you intend to make them now. The sacrifices tend to go in cycles. We've had a great many girls die recently in a relatively short period of time. There are more variables which play into it than the type of lessons the girls are given." Lilith stepped up close to Mira. Lifting her chin, she forced Mira to look her directly in the eyes. "I find that in my vast experience over the years, the difference in the sacrifices was within the girls themselves, not what they were told before they met him." Lilith released Mira from her grip. "I think you'll see what I mean as you look amongst the sacrifices for who you will send. It needs to be done tonight. Come, we'll go back to the round house. I'll tell your friends that the planning for your handfasting can continue on the 'morrow. You have work to do today."

"A day isn't enough time," Mira said, panicked. "I can't explain it all in one afternoon."

Lilith was already walking toward the round house. "You'll have to find a way. He needs to be fed before he leaves for his next assignment. You of all people should know how he goes about it. It may take some time. And we are drastically short on that."

It was an order, not a request. Mira knew from the tone that she had no choice in the matter. Reluctantly she followed Lilith to the round house and stood by, as the announcement was made that handfasting plans would need be continued on a different date. The fear that followed the announcement about the next sacrifice to be chose disgusted Mira. *He deserves better than that.* Tears in her eyes, she resolved to

find someone who could handle it. *Lilith is wrong. I can teach them. It will be better. They'll live longer. Maybe he'll be happy.*

Mira started by asking if there were any volunteers. It made sense to her to think that the braver the girl might be the better off she would be. Only three girls came forward. *Well that makes things a little easier. I suppose it narrows the possibilities enough to make choosing a girl for this evening feasible.*

Taking the girls who had volunteered out to the garden, Mira found herself attempting to come up with a way to pick amongst them. Her mind swam trying to think of all the things about herself which made the situation with Rillan bearable. But she honestly didn't understand what made her different from any of the others.

The girls stood watching her and waiting. It never occurred to Mira that she may be frightening them with her contemplative silence. The girls saw Mira mumbling to herself and pacing. In the morning sunlight, next to the beauty of the garden flowers, Mira's deterioration was all the more apparent. She was gaunt and pale, though still beautiful in a haunting way. None of the sacrifices wanted to know exactly what changed the Mira they knew before into what they saw now.

Finally Mira turned toward them, seeing bravery fading from her eyes; she decided that the best way to go about it would be to allow them to choose themselves. "I think that the best thing to do will be to give you all the crash course and then make the final decision as to who will go, at the end of the day."

The girls nodded, and the lessons began. Mira started by explaining to them how they had to go about looking for Rillan and why. She somehow thought that if they

knew why he behaved the way he did, then they would be able to handle it. As sunset approached, Mira's voice was hoarse and she had lost count of the number of times the emphatic nods of understanding had turned to horror as Mira related her experiences in the vampire's caves.

"Alright then, I'm sorry it has to be this way. There is no more time. I need to know if any of you have changed your minds."

The smallest of the three girls began trembling and crying, however she didn't ask to be dismissed. Mira looked into the eyes of the other two. All she saw was fear. They may not have been crying, but their bravery was gone as surely as the other girl's. Mira felt a strange mix of disappointment and happiness. She was afraid for the girls. At the same time, she was pleased to find that she wasn't as easily replaced as she believed she would be. Angry at herself for even thinking those thoughts, she glared at the three girls.

"I'll be honest with you all. I don't really want to choose amongst you. I don't want to feel responsible personally for sending anyone to their death. I've tried to tell myself that we are all dying. Still, I'm not the Fates, and I don't relish that kind of power; deciding when. So if any of you believes you can handle it better than the others, I would like to know now." They didn't say anything. They merely stood together, staring doe-eyed at Mira and holding each other's hands.

"I'm sorry, but Lilith is waiting. I only hope that all I've told you today will aid you." Mira decided on the girl in the middle. She had consistently been reassuring the other two all day. When she was chosen the girl nodded understanding, and the other two were dismissed to prepare for the ceremony.

“What’s your name,” Mira asked. It was the first time she really looked at the girl all day. She was tall and thin, very pretty. She wore her hair in long, dark brown, plaits down the back of her head. She had dark blue eyes, similar to Rillan’s, and fair porcelain skin. A twinge of jealousy shot through Mira, and she quickly pushed it to the back of her mind.

“Aris,” her voice cracked. She cleared her throat, pretending that fear wasn’t the cause for the tremor.

“Come, it’s time to get dressed,” Mira said and led the way back to the round house.

Wavering in the warm light of the setting sun, Aris stared into the icy darkness of the cave, her white shift blowing slightly in the breeze. Her mind raced endlessly, trying to remind her of why she chose this, attempting to dull the fear in the pit of her stomach, and reminding her of the importance of what she was about to do.

Mira watched from the gate, as Aris took her first reluctant steps toward the darkness that Mira saw so tempting and welcoming. She stared into the shadows for some hint of Rillan, knowing that even if he were there, watching, she wouldn’t be able to see him.

“Rillan ap Tiernay,” Lilith intoned over the crowd, “was created to protect and serve the circle. Our guardian. Each generation a group of girls is chosen as companions in his darkness. This is the price of his loyalty.”

Mira didn’t hear Lilith’s speech. Not that it mattered. She knew the speech by heart. It was the same for each of the girls who entered the vampire’s cave. Mira’s mind was more concerned with the parts of the story that were left out of the flowery

farewell and the fact that this time it was intended for Aris. Somehow she felt slighted that the speech was not for her.

Mira looked up from her thoughts to find that the high priestess had stopped speaking. Everyone was waiting for Aris to finish the ceremony. They were patient and stood quietly. Mira didn't know how long they waited for Aris to realize it was her turn. Now as she looked around, she was more afraid of what was to happen to the girl than she thought she would be. The lessons were all too short; so matter of fact. *There wasn't enough time to train her properly. She's going to die like the others, only this time it will be my fault. It's my duty. I should be going. I belong to him, not her.* Mira couldn't stop her mind from churning. Tears fogged her vision. She realized suddenly that she felt as if she was losing a lover.

Mira stepped shakily forward, gripping the gate, praying that Aris would turn and run. The moon, high in the sky now, cast a blood red sheen over the clearing and an eerie light beyond the gate. Aris passed through the tall, rusted iron gateway, and it creaked, swinging shut behind her. The clanking gate lock sent a jolt through Mira. The last of her heart seemed to have been locked on the other side. She looked into the darkness beyond the mouth of the cave trying to see if he was watching, but she couldn't see anything. The little light that touched the hungry cave mouth was swallowed into the black, offering no hint of what lay within.

Mira turned around to see if the others were still watching. No one was there. The gate had been locked, and she was standing alone, watching Aris. All that was left for her was to enter the cave and find him. Mira's eyes traveled the twisted metal

archway that she studied so many times in the past. Now, as she stood facing the closed gate, she realized that she was truly on the wrong side.

Chapter 12

Darius wrapped his cloak around his shoulders and tried to ignore the unnatural cold. Strange weather, difficult terrain, and wild animals plagued the march from Noviodunum since they started the trek to the Circle. The men were becoming steadily uneasy, and young Marcus Novanus was beginning to falter in his resolve.

Children. The fool boy will ruin this for me. It's been too long and too much hard work. Darius was in the middle of working out a plan for disposing of Novanus and managing to keep the footsoldiers for his own purposes, when an alarm cry went out. "What now," Darius snarled as he turned and stalked back into camp. He interrupted the urgent conversation between Marcus and a guard.

"How many?" Marcus only glanced at Darius, as he approached.

"Six, milord," the guard said, rubbing his head. There was a bloody gash along his forehead.

"Were we attacked," Darius asked with concern, looking around for further commotion or at least the person who had bloodied the guard.

Marcus turned on Darius with an authoritative tone that could only come from a child of Tiberius. "You were not spoken too, druid." After the reprimand, Marcus returned his attention to the guard. "Why," he growled angrily at the man.

"The men are uneasy milord," he replied nervously. "They say that the curses which have followed us from Noviodunum will only worsen if we continue. They say it's not worth the little pay they are given. There is fear of what we will face when we reach the Circle. I believe more will run if our luck does not appear to shift soon."

Marcus began pacing. He didn't know what to do. He was having a hard enough time controlling the troops in Noviodunum. Now men were deserting him. *Father would never allow this. They wouldn't even consider running from Tiberius.*

Darius could see that Marcus was losing his self control, possibly his mind. Not only that, but the boy was becoming obstinate and difficult to control. His brothers were too young to be of use and had been left at home. If things continued in this vein then Darius would have no army left when they reached the Circle. *I wonder how much of the strange occurrences were arranged for us by the elders. The things they are capable of and yet they force our people to live in squalor, contemplating nature and stars. When I control the Circle...* Darius broke himself from his vengeful musings and managed to persuade Marcus to retire for the evening.

Once inside the large lavish tent, Darius approached a heavy wooden table in the center of the main entrance. Pouring out wine for himself and Marcus, he waited patiently for the boy to ask his advice. He always did. Darius tapped his ring impatiently on the rim of Marcus' cup, watching the surface of the warm red liquid ripple and the brown dust disappear into the drink.

Without offering the cup to Marcus, Darius tipped his own cup to his lips. Marcus stepped up to the table and grabbed the other cup for himself. "So what do you suggest druid," the boy said snidely, downing half the wine in one swallow. "The men desert my cause, and I admit that the circumstances of this march have been unnerving. The animals of the forest attack randomly and without warning. The night is unseasonably cold. Trees and brush seem to bar our path. Men grow ill with no cause." Marcus finished the rest of the wine in his cup and stepped to the table to pour himself another.

“Even an unsuperstitious man would see this march as cursed. What do your fellows do to us, and how do we stop it? Or are you as useless as my father used to say?”

Darius had been losing his patience steadily, as Marcus became increasingly insulting and demanding. “Firstly, milord,” Darius answered, glaring at the boy, “your father never kept any man around who he did not see as worth something. Secondly, the animals may attack because of the cold. The cold may be because a local village paid no sacrifice as proper to the correct Gods. Once a man believes he is haunted, then all manner of things can be frightening, including plants overwhelming an unkempt path, and men in new places grow ill. Your father would have been able to offer such explanations to these men and control their fear before they allowed their imaginations to run them off. There is no proof that the circumstances of this miserable march were anything other than poor fate. For a group of men who don’t believe druids capable of what I claimed, you’re all certainly quick to blame the druids for things which could merely be nature.” Darius sipped his wine, staring into the boy’s eyes. “Unfortunately for both of us, you are too young and inexperienced to think of such things.”

Marcus felt the wine seeping into his body more quickly than usual. Darius’ droning voice slipped to the back of his mind, and he stumbled toward his large chair. The room was already spinning. Suddenly Darius’ face was directly in front of his own.

“That is why you have forced me to take the situation in hand. One way or another, I need to reach the Circle with enough troops to take control. You couldn’t have been just a nice compliant young man could you?”

“Compliant young man,” Marcus echoed hollowly.

Darius smiled. "That'll do. Go to bed, get some sleep. We have a speech for the morning march. Then I want to gain some ground. They have to know I'm coming by now."

Without a word of protest Marcus got to his feet and followed Darius' command. "I should have done that to him months ago," Darius growled and then left the tent. *Not to mention, his tainted blood will be the perfect trap for the vampire. I wonder what the elders would think if they knew that not all of their secrets have been kept as well as they believe.*

At the main entrance, he stopped and leaned toward the guard. "He doesn't wish to be disturbed. Lord Novanus wants to sleep until morning. Summon me when he awakes." The guard nodded, and Darius walked away from the large tent to go and find his.

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Aris realized her wrong turn when the rough hewn cave walls went on too long with no promise of turning into carved stone. "Mira said it only took a few hours of walking for her to find the right tunnels. I think I've been walking at least that long. And there's no closet with a lantern." The sound of her whispers echoing in the darkness offered little comfort.

Collapsing against a cold damp wall, sharp stone bit into her shoulder. Aris ignored the pain and wrapped her arms around her shivering frame. It didn't really matter how much Mira explained, Aris was cold, hungry, thirsty, and terrified. "This must be what it's like to be blind," she whimpered.

First she considered trying to fall asleep, like Mira had. “That would make time pass more quickly.” But every little sound in the darkness drew her attention. “That was probably a mouse,” she whispered at a shuffling near her feet. “That was just a bat,” she cried at a shrieking noise echoing in the black. Aris turned sharply to look down the cave tunnel in the direction she thought she came from. “Footsteps,” she asked the darkness. Aris strained to stare into the emptiness, trying desperately to see something, anything. Suddenly she realized that he may be coming to get her.

Turning Aris began running. She only managed a few steps before tripping on something on the floor and sprawling on ground. “Hello,” she barely managed to squeak out. Scrapping her hands on the ground, Aris scrambled back up against the wall, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Please,” she whimpered. “Lord Tiernay?”

Rillan nearly left her there. *I don't know what I expected. As if anyone could be capable of instilling Mira's soul in one of these sacrifices. Even Mira. No amount of training will change what they are.*

Rillan knelt next to the girl and stared at her, knowing that she had no idea how close he was. For the first time in his existence, he considered putting her out of her misery without waiting for permission. *I don't have time for this. I need to get out and inspect the so called army coming for me. To do that I have to feed.* Somewhere in the back of Rillan's mind was a futile hope that the army may actually be good enough to end all this.

Rillan stared into the girl's wide, tearful eyes with disgust. Uncertain whether the annoyance he felt was for himself or the new girl, Rillan forced the beast down and reached out for the girl.

A terror-filled scream like nothing Rillan ever heard echoed in his ears. “By all the Gods, girl,” Rillan snarled, taking several steps back from her and covering his ears.

Aris scrambled to her feet, feeling along the wall.

“Calm down,” Rillan growled harshly.

Flinching at the sound of his voice, Aris considered her options for running.

Rillan could see the frantic look on her face and the desperate way she was cringing away from him. “Don’t be stupid. Come with me. There’s food and rest. We’ll deal with your inadequate training when you’ve had some time to think clearly.”

Mention of food seemed to register with her. Rillan waited for Aris to gain some composure before reaching out for her again. She didn’t say a word, as he walked her down the halls toward the main tunnels. *This is why they get left in the labyrinth for days*, he grouched angrily on the way back to his rooms.

* * * *

Mira stared sadly at the pile of flowers that the girls were gathering and weaving into wreaths and garland to decorate the stone circle for the ceremony. Helen pointed in different directions, and girls went running to take care of her orders. Mira’s head spun. Helen proved to be a most efficient planner; from the flowers to the clothing, even the handfasting cord.

Holding out the cord for Mira to see, Helen waited for the lavish thanks and praise that she believed she deserved. The cord was woven from pearl white silk thread and speckled with tiny flowers and ivy. Helen beamed with pride. The cord was exactly what she wanted when she finally chose to be handfasted. She couldn’t imagine that any woman would not see the beauty in the simple cord.

“Thank you Helen,” Mira said softly. “It’s gorgeous. If you hadn’t taken this all in hand, I don’t know that it would have been accomplished so quickly.” Mira’s voice trailed off, as she spoke. Standing, shakily turning the cord over and over in her hands, Mira began to cry.

Helen smiled with pride, believing that the tears were of appreciation. She leaned in and hugged Mira gently. “I know how difficult it has been for you to come back to us after what happened. Even if Liam hadn’t asked me to help you, I would have wanted to.”

Pulling away from Helen, as gently as she could, so that it wouldn’t be misinterpreted as an insult, Mira nodded, wiped the tears from her cheeks and went back to the round house and her bedroom. At least there, with the door closed, she could get some peace. All she wanted was sleep.

At this rate we’ll be ready for the ceremony in a matter of days, she thought. The idea made her sick to her stomach. Closing the door behind her, Mira began sobbing. She threw herself down on her small bed, wrapped her blankets around herself, and closed her eyes. Sleep was long in coming, but a welcome reprieve to her thoughts.

* * * *

Rillan considered his next step carefully. He could tell, after the centuries of dealing with sacrifices, this one was going to take a lot of coddling. Unfortunately, he simply didn’t have the patience or ability to wait for her to come to him on her own terms.

Standing in the shadows of her doorway, he watched her sitting at the dressing table brushing her hair. She had been brushing for over an hour; sitting, staring in the

mirror. Her manor and demeanor annoyed Rillan and reminded him of why he had taken to doing things as he did. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself the torment of imagining Mira waiting for him, smiling at him, and wanting him.

Thoroughly disgusted with himself, Rillan stepped out of the shadows. Catching sight of Rillan in her mirror, Aris dropped her brush and gasped. She whirled around to face Rillan, abject terror streaking her features.

“Take off your clothes and lie down on the bed girl,” Rillan growled callously.

Aris shook her head and backed up into the dressing table. “M—Mira said you would wait until I was ready,” she blurted.

“I would. If I had time. But I have an assignment. I’ve waited as long as I’m able,” he growled. Frustrated, Rillan let his better half through, in the hopes of reassuring the girl. “I’ll make it as short as possible. Just do as you’re told,” he added in a softer tone.

The change in his approach appeared to comfort Aris some. She reluctantly began to undress. A blush started in her cheeks and spread across her entire body. Rillan was far from immune to the sight of the beautiful young girl standing naked in front of him. His eyes caressed her flesh, in a way he knew his hands could not.

Rillan took in her brown hair and dark blue eyes. Her flawless pale skin was deepening to a dark pink, as he looked her over. “Lay down on the bed,” he said gently.

Timidly, Aris moved over to the bed and crawled to the middle. The basest side of Rillan’s animalistic tendencies always enjoyed watching them crawl across the bed. He considered the curve of her back, her soft thighs, and the innocent way her sex peeked from between her legs, as she moved to the middle of the bed. Just like all the

others, when she realized what he was looking at she sat down and laid back, closed her eyes and waited in embarrassment for what would happen next.

Rillan pulled his shirt off and tossed it across the chair. He didn't know how far he was going to take this, but he hated cleaning blood off his clothes. Kneeling on the bed next to the naked girl, he realized that he never asked her name. Staring down into her fear marred faced, he knew that he didn't actually care what it was.

Aris felt the weight on the bed and lay trembling in anticipation of what he would do to her. She kept telling herself, *Mira said to keep your eyes closed. Don't open your eyes and just wait. He'll make the pain worth it. He's a good man. He only needs sympathy.*

The smell of fear assailed Rillan's nostrils, he could hear her heart racing in her chest, and her breathing was ragged and choppy. *Stupid girl is going to hyperventilate.* The human portion of his soul hating the smell of fear and knowing that he was the cause retreated, and the vampire stole control of Rillan's body. Black bled from his pupils, until it filled his eyes sockets. His skin pulled taught to his features, paper thin and pasty white. His lips pulled back from his teeth, causing the needle filled mouth to illustrate the vicious predator which lay within. Leaning down near her, what little humanity was left in his control at that moment reached for her gently, in an attempt to warn her that he was going to start.

With the touch of his hand on her shoulder, all thoughts in Aris' mind went blank. Her eyes flew open, and she stared wide-eyed into the face of the vampire about to feed on her. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. The odor of fear

became overwhelming, and that was joined with the reek of ammonia. *She peed herself*, he thought angrily. All sympathy fled, and Rillan grabbed Aris by her shoulders.

“You want something to fear? I can easily oblige,” the vampire growled. Holding her squirming body down, Rillan reared back, giving Aris a full view of the mouth that was about to rip her shoulder apart. Bending down, Rillan bit hard on the join between her neck and her shoulder.

Aris shrieked. Pain seared through her body, followed by an intense burning. “Please,” she begged, in between breaths. The protests and screaming only seemed to spur him on. *This isn’t what Mira said it would be. This isn’t what Mira said it would be. This isn’t what Mira said it would be.* Aris’ mind whirled with fear and confusion until finally it went blank.

Rillan finished feeding and stood up. Looking down at the girl, he threw a blanket over her body, grabbed his shirt and stomped off down the hall. He had duties to perform, before he left.

Dressing to leave for the approaching army, Rillan stared at the two small packages on the chest at the foot of his bed. He had been debating when he should give them to her. *In case I don’t come back from this*, he thought. Picking up the two small packages, he shoved them into his pockets and strode down the hall. He couldn’t decide if the idea of not coming back was comforting or disturbing.

The halls echoed with his footsteps, as he made his way out: Mira’s room, the rooms he had left the new girl in, the library and study. As he left the caves, no wind stirred. There were no clouds. The moon shone brightly enough to give the feel of day to Rillan, who was so used to the total black of his caves. The moonlight made it an

easy thing for the vampire to slip through the ancient forest, into the small druid town, and to the round house that had forever been home to the sacrifices.

Rillan wasn't sure if Mira was in the round house, but he figured it was the best place to start. If he had to search every house in the small town, he would find her before he left. Fortunately his guess paid off. He felt as though he was drawn to her. Circling the round house he peered into each of the small windows until a figure in one of the beds caught his attention.

Rillan knew Mira's frame, even covered in blankets. Slipping in through the window, Rillan stood next to her bed, staring down at her tear streaked face, wondering what hurt her and caused her to cry herself to sleep. All he wanted was to find the source of her pain and destroy it. He felt so helpless standing there, looking down at her, and knowing there was truly nothing he could do to fix what hurt her.

At length, he tore his eyes from her quiet form and looked around for a place to leave the packages. The room she slept in was small. It was made even smaller by the piles of ceremonial decorations strewn about. In one corner, carefully folded and draped across a small chair, Rillan spied an intricately embroidered chemise and skirt. Walking over to the clothing, he felt as if his chest had been ripped open and his heart torn out. A handfasting cord lay across the top of the pile of clothing.

Closing his eyes Rillan took several deep breaths. *This is why you sent her back*, he told himself. *You knew that she would be wanted. She'll be able to have children, live in the sun, and be happy.* Rillan opened his eyes, half hoping that when he did the clothing and especially the cord would have vanished. But there they were, gleaming in the moonlight.

Reaching into his pockets he withdrew the two carefully wrapped packages. He placed them atop of the cord. Before he left, he walked back over to Mira's sleeping form. Bending down, he placed a small kiss on her lips, smelled her hair, and whispered softly, "All the blessings of the Gods be on you, sweet one."

Mira's eyes shot open. Touching her lips, she couldn't believe that it was a dream. "Rillan?" She sat up in bed and looked around the room, her eyes examining the shadows for any sign of him. *Nothing?* As Mira lay back down and closed her eyes, more tears squeezed out from beneath the lids. *I could have sworn I heard him. I must be going insane*, she thought. It was several hours of lying in bed with her eyes squeezed closed and her thoughts churning, before she fell fitfully back to sleep.

Chapter 13

Lilith stood in the shadow of a large elm with several elders, watching the sacrifices scurry about planning the handfasting of Liam and Mira. The entire town was focused on preparations for the handfasting. Though it wasn't standard for everything to stand still for one random ceremony, it was the town's way of avoiding thinking about the danger coming.

An older man with a long gray beard and wrinkled leather skin sighed heavily. "The army is only a day or two off. We've no word from the vampire. Should we stop them and prepare for war?"

"What war?" Lilith harrumphed. "If the army attacks us, no matter how weak Rillan ap Tiernay says they may be, we will be slaughtered as livestock. We've no weapons, no knowledge of weapon use. What do you propose? Pitchforks and pails as swords and shields?"

The old man shook his head and sighed again. "I don't like waiting for death, Lilith."

"Isn't that what we do every day? We all die."

"Leave it to you to get philosophical about the matter."

"No," Lilith said, turning toward him. "Not philosophical, merely practical. Fewer people will die if we surrender without fuss. You know that. We, long ago, became too used to our protected existence. Change isn't a bad or good thing. It simply is."

"And if the army arrives to 'change our existence'," he said sarcastically, "during a handfasting ceremony?"

Lilith leveled a small knowing smile on her friend. “Then we invite them to the festivities. That should certainly confuse them.”

The old man growled, but gave in. “There is no point in arguing with you Lilith. When was the last time you didn’t have the last word in a conversation?”

“I often fail to have the last word.”

“Okay, so when was the last time you didn’t come out two or three points ahead?”

Lilith returned to watching the girls dart back and forth in a rush of excitement. She was happy that they found something to smile about. The sacrifices of recent generations spent far too much time dwelling on what their end would be like and not nearly enough time enjoying what they had.

* * * *

“I only want to see if the headdress matches the handfasting cord as well as I think it will,” Helen said excitedly. She studiously ignored the exasperated expression on Mira’s face, as the door to Mira’s room swung open.

Helen virtually skipped across the room, chattering happily. “We should have everything ready tomorrow or maybe the day after, at the latest.”

Mira sighed and nodded. “Not to sound ungrateful, but it all seems to be moving so quickly.”

Smiling dismissively, Helen picked up one of the packages sitting on top of Mira’s clothes and the handfasting cord. “You’re still recovering from your time away from us. I have faith in the Fates that when you’re at the ceremony and everyone is gathered around and you’re standing with Liam, you’ll start to feel better. You may even smile,”

she added with amusement. Holding up the package to Mira, Helen changed the subject. "What's this," she asked curiously.

"I don't know," Mira replied heavily. "I assumed you left it. It was with the rest of the stuff you left for me."

Helen's eyes gleamed with excitement. "No. Maybe Liam left it," she suggested, certain that it was an early surprise for Mira.

The comment only made Mira less inclined to open the package. In truth, her mind kept coming back to a disturbing idea she had that morning. Lilith said that he had a new assignment, but she didn't say what. Mira was more than smart enough to add everything together. There were rumors of a coming army, and no one was preparing to fight them. Mira may not have known what they intended Rillan to do, but she could figure out easily enough that it had to have something to do with the coming army. She was more than a little distracted with that train of thought. She wasn't interested in handfasting presents.

Helen pushed the package into Mira's hands. "Open it," she persisted in her annoyingly cheerful manor.

Lacking the strength of will to protest, Mira untied the string and unwrapped the soft purple fabric covering the package. Immediately, she recognized the long carved wooden box that held the whistle she was so fond of. Her hands began to shake. She flipped the latch and opened it. A tear formed in her eye, and she choked back the urge to start crying again. "This isn't from Liam," she said breathlessly.

Helen's mood dropped. "What is it?" She moved around so that she could see the whistle in the box. "It's very pretty," she said in confusion. "I didn't know you could play."

Mira didn't respond. She didn't have it in her to explain the whistle to Helen. Closing the box carefully, she placed it on her bed and looked at the second package. It was smaller than the whistle and appeared to be more carefully wrapped. For several long moments, she stood staring at the small bundle. When she finally gathered her strength, she lifted it lightly in her hands and pulled the string and fabric from the little box. The box itself was nothing special. It was only a plain hinged wooden box, too small for most uses. Opening the lid Mira found a silver rose shaped pendant on a long soft black ribbon. A single dark pearl graced the center of the beautifully shaped flower.

Helen gasped, "By the Fates, it's beautiful. Who gave it to you?" She was already searching the wrapping and boxes for some note or indication of who the gifts were from. Liam wasn't going to like this. It wasn't exactly respectful to gift a woman with things better than her betrothed was capable of providing upon their handfasting.

"Never mind, Helen," Mira said softly. "Please go. I need some rest."

Helen looked up with some concern. "You slept in very late. Now you want to go back to sleep. It's not even noon."

"Please. I'm not feeling well."

"Alright," Helen conceded. She wanted to go talk to Liam anyway. "I'll be back to check on you later."

Mira accepted that and closed the door after her as Helen left. Placing the pendant back in its box, Mira sat down on the edge of her bed. Her head spinning, she

could only think of one thing that had ever helped her with this kind of loneliness and confusion. Lifting the whistle to her lips, Mira began to play.

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Churning cold black wrapped around Aris. Nausea wracked her body. Before she could remember where she was or what was happening, her stomach heaved and vomit covered her chest. Pain shot through her. Sitting up in bed, she realized that at some point she must have peed herself as well. The room reeked.

Rolling over, she managed to get out of the mess she was lying in. Visions of a monster with empty eye sockets and a lipless mouthful of razor sharp teeth flashed across her memory, and she fell to her knees shrieking in terror.

* * * *

Sunset seemed to settle unnaturally early on the forest, while the Noviodunum soldiers prepared to make camp. Anger and frustration spread like wild fire throughout the troops, when word circulated that Marcus had not been seen in days and Darius was giving orders. The general consensus was that if dark came early, then camp should come early too.

"My Lord," the guard said with a sneer. "The troops could do with hearing from Marcus."

"I told you," Darius replied with conviction. "Marcus is not feeling well. You can attempt to speak with him if you wish," Darius stepped aside to allow the guard into the large tent. "I happen to think that exposing the men to a potentially catching illness and allowing them to see the state he's in would be worse than letting them speculate. For

now, you'll just have to take his orders as I convey them to you and attempt to be happy with that."

The guard looked at the door that Darius had cleared. At the word "catching" he was almost guaranteed to not set foot in the tent. Darius was counting on that. Hesitating, he leveled his gaze on Darius, "How do I know you didn't do something to him?"

"I hardly think I would be encouraging you to go in there and examine the situation if I had done anything that would promote you or any of your fellows to off my head. Think as you like. I, for one, am more annoyed than you can possibly imagine at being put in the middle of this," Darius growled at the guard. "You want to take up the position of sitting next to his bed and waiting for him to be coherent enough to give orders then be my guest. I'll return to Noviodunum. Avenging his father's death is no great concern of mine."

Being ignorant enough of the true politics behind the situation, the guard decided to take Darius at his word. "Fine. What are the orders?"

"We keep going as we have been. Break camp at dawn. We should arrive at the druid town in less than a day's march. We'll make camp when the town is in sight, assess the situation, and decide on a course of attack then. I suggest that whoever Marcus normally would consult on tactics be gathered for a meeting tomorrow."

Darius walked away from the guard, with a wicked grin splitting his face. *Things couldn't be going more perfectly. I have the fool guard obeying my every command, and when the only real threat to my plans shows up, he should immediately try to eliminate Marcus. I wonder what affect the drugs will have on a vampire.*

Entering his own tent, he looked around at his meager accommodations and began undressing for bed. *The first thing I'll do when I've conquered the Circle is build a domus in place of my round house and put a bed the size of this tent in the middle of my sleeping chamber.*

Rillan stood in the shadows, watching the guards set camp. *There can't be more than fifty guards. I wonder who the other houses are that sent support for this stupidity. The real question is; do I bother to put forth the effort to frighten them back where they came from and let them live, or do I kill them in their sleep.* Rillan could hear the beast in his head voting for the latter option.

Fog began to roll into camp, causing more unease amongst the guard. "Is it just me or do you feel like we're being watched?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I say this entire march has been cursed. We're all walking into our own deaths."

"I told you I don't want to talk about it," the guard snapped. Standing, he stormed through the haze toward his tent. "I'm going to my pallet before I can't find it. I suggest you do the same, instead of blathering on like a moron."

"We're not getting paid enough for this."

Taking advantage of the fog, Rillan moved among the tents, listening to the various complaints of the men and piecing together the circumstances of the trip from Noviodunum to the Circle.

“Halt, who goes,” a voice from nearby called toward Rillan’s shadowy figure in the fog. The guard may not have been able to see Rillan well, but he could see enough to know that he wasn’t another guard.

A heavy sigh of annoyance escaped Rillan’s chest. He could hear others nearby getting up to see what was going on. Darting toward the guard, in one swift movement he dodged the swing of the guard’s gladius and grabbed him around the head and shoulders. A sickening crack preceded the spurt of blood that gushed from the guard’s neck when Rillan snapped his head back.

The smell of fresh blood nearly distracted Rillan from his purpose. But it only took a moment for him to take his vampire half in hand and continue in his mission. Slipping through the tents, Rillan could hear the commotion begin, when another guard found the body of the one he killed.

Great, he thought in frustration, now I have a time limit

Deciding that the quickest way of dealing with the supposed army would be to make a bloody mess of their leader, Rillan worked his way to the largest tent in the encampment. Pushing aside the flap which served as a door, Rillan looked around with disgust at the lavish accommodations afforded to the leader of this fracas.

Closing his eyes, Rillan surrendered himself to the beast within. Skin paled and pulled taught on his face, eyes sank back into black holes in his skull, and claws protruded from bent fingers. Suddenly the room focused with complete clarity, and Rillan began to search for the son of Tiberius Novanus.

It only took moments to find the sleeping form in a makeshift bed, behind a partition that separated his sleeping area from the main room of the tent. Upon seeing

the smallish form Rillan stopped. *He's no more than a boy.* Angry, Rillan slipped back into the shadows to think.

As Rillan stood watching, a robed figure rushed into the room straight for the bed. Finding Marcus sleeping peacefully, Darius moved to a nearby table and lit the lantern sitting on it. Holding it aloft, he swung it wildly about his head, peering into shadows.

"I know you must be here," he snarled.

To Rillan's amusement, the man actually seemed to not be afraid of him. Rillan looked the man over. It didn't make much sense. The man looked distinctly like one of his own people, but he was wearing Noviodunum clothing. The vampire in Rillan smiled with satisfaction, *the traitor.*

Darius began storming about the room searching corners. Unable to contain himself any longer, Rillan stepped into the lantern light. "Are you in such a hurry to die?"

Darius never expected the nightmare that faced him. All but losing his resolve, Darius screamed, "Guards! Guards!"

A demonic chuckle, enough to cause Darius to drop the lantern and back away, rolled from Rillan's chest. Within moments, several guards burst into the room. They only barely caught a glimpse of Rillan, before he disappeared into the shadows again. There wasn't any time to think about what they saw. The lantern on the ground spilled its oil, and the tent caught fire. Darius stood blathering incoherently, while the lead guard shouted orders.

The guards barely managed to grab Marcus and drag Darius out of the burning tent. By the time the guards managed to put out the fire, nearly all of the others had arrived to see what was going on.

“See, we’re cursed.”

“Did anyone else see it?”

“What was it?”

“The vampire!”

“The druids sent the vampire for us now!”

“Where’s Marcus?”

“He won’t wake up?”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“We’re cursed!”

Rillan stood back and watched, as the irrational fear from a long march and numerous odd coincidences fed into the subconscious of the superstitious men. Darius did his best to attempt to calm the situation. He was too late, however; it had taken him so long to regain his own coherence that the damage was already done. By morning, Darius only had a handful of guards left. All the others had taken what they could and disappeared into the woods during the night.

Rillan couldn’t help but find the incompetence of the traitor amusing. *I’ve never had such an easy assignment.*

The few men who were left were the last of the most loyal men from Tiberius' house guard. As morning dawned, they began tearing down the few tents which were left.

"Alright," Darius started. "There may only be a few of us left, but the druids aren't fighters. I think we can still manage."

The guard with the most rank rolled his eyes. "Do we have everything," he asked one of the others.

"I think so. What about Marcus?"

"Carry him. Maybe one of the apothecaries in Noviodunum can help him." The guard glared over at Darius. "Continue your quest alone druid. We return to Noviodunum. The senate was right. This was suicide. You're lucky we don't cut off your feet and leave you here for the predators that have been stalking us since we left civilization."

Darius fumed angrily. "Suicide? Suicide! No one has died! You all need to gather what you can and come with me. It's only a day's walk from here.

"It's over druid. Go home and accept your position in life. You won't be welcome in Noviodunum once I've related the events of this trip."

Rillan watched Darius beg and plead. The men finished gathering their things, and turned back the way they came. A strange sense of well-being rushed over him as he realized that he managed to finish his assignment and only killed a single man. *It's truly amazing what fear alone can do.*

* * * *

Every thump, thud, drip, or squeak in the darkness, every stirring, even her own heartbeat, made Aris tremble. *When's he coming back?* "How should I know," she answered herself.

Maybe he won't come back.

"That's a nice dream. You volunteered for this. Stop whining and get ready. He'll want to feed on you again."

Aris shook her head and cowered in the black corner of the room. She had yet to find a way to light the fire or lanterns. She hadn't even managed to clean and dress herself.

Maybe he won't be hungry.

"Of course he'll be hungry. He'll always be hungry."

That's not what Mira said.

"And you trust that bitch? She picked you. She sent you here."

No I volunteered.

"She only told you that it wouldn't be so bad so that you would go more willingly. Foolish little Aris. Always do as you're told Aris. I wonder if he likes what you taste like. I wonder if he'll try your body next time. Make use of you for more than just a meal."

Aris heard laughter in the darkness, echoing off the wall of the room he put her in. The laughter almost sounded like her own voice but it couldn't be. Could it?

"Maybe he'll be nicer too you if you make it easier on him."

What do you mean?

"You could get ready for him. Women cook for their men when they're hungry. Your man merely wants your blood and body. Much easier preparation there."

I don't understand.

"Don't be stupid. Do I have to explain everything to you? Fill a cup for him and he won't have to bite you. Better for everyone. You don't have to be bitten, and he gets what he wants. I would think he would be grateful for not having to do the work himself? I bet Mira never thought to do that for him. It's probably why he didn't want her anymore."

I don't know. How would I do it?

"There were cooking things by the hearth. Bound to be a knife and a cup."

Aris felt along the floor as she crawled roughly in the direction of the fireplace. It took her some time to find it. But in the end she managed. *I've got it.* She held up a long sharp knife.

"Now find a cup."

There's one right here.

"Good. You know what to do now."

Aris carefully placed the cup on the hearth in front of herself. She did her best to line her wrist up with the cup in the darkness. The cold in the cave combined with the lack of clothing had her numb enough to the environment that she barely felt the knife slice into the flesh of her wrist. She whimpered as she felt the warm stick fluid begin to drain into the cup.

"See there. That wasn't nearly as bad as what he did to you."

How much do you think he'll want?

"Hard to say. Better give him as much as you can stand."

Tell me when the cup is full, Aris asked. She began feeling a bit faint. *I can't really see.*

"Of course. Keep going. You're almost there."

Chapter 14

A pleased sense of accomplishment filled Rillan. He walked down the long hall. His boots echoed dully off the walls. For the first time in centuries, he started to think that it may be possible for him to accomplish his assignments without destroying everything he touched. Passing the door leading to Aris' rooms, the distinct tinge of copper on the air tugged at his beast.

Stopping in mid stride and swearing under his breath, Rillan threw open the heavy wooden door and streaked down the pitch black hall. Even in the abyssal darkness, his demon eyes could see Aris lying in a puddle of her own blood on the hearth of her fireplace.

"No," Rillan growled fiercely. "Not this time. Not already." In a moment, he was on his knees next to her body. Rillan forced himself to ignore the repulsion he felt, when he noticed that she had yet to clean herself. Leaning down to listen for her heartbeat, Rillan wrestled with his vampire. The metallic blood odor permeating the air was almost too much for him.

Picking up her dirty, cold, limp frame Rillan almost missed the soft thud in her chest. Suddenly her hand reached up to touch his face. Flinching, Rillan stared into her eyes, a strange manic fear gazed back at him and held him captivated.

In a tiny, breathless voice Aris whispered to him, "Please, I don't want to die."

Almost dropping her to the stone floor, he released her and paced away from her. "Stupid girl. You're past saving," Rillan continued under his breath, "unless you want to be like me."

A soft, shallow whimper parted Aris' lips, and tears seeped from her closed eyelids. "I—I—wasn't r—ready."

Staring down at her, Rillan's heart raced. In all the years he had dealt with the sacrifices, he had never been forced into a situation like this. *They all died willingly. They all died because they wanted it. I didn't kill any of them.* "Why, the hell, did you have to do this? Why tonight?" *First time in centuries that things seemed—*

Rillan didn't know what to think any longer. He felt as though he couldn't let Aris die this way, but the only answer wasn't something he would wish on his worst enemy. In one sudden movement, he was on his knees next to her again. Propping Aris up against the hearth, Rillan forced her to face him in the dark. He knew that she couldn't see him, but he needed to know that she heard him.

"Girl," he hissed, "open your eyes."

Aris was too far gone to be frightened any longer. She knew she was dying. The room spun around her, the darkness swam, and his voice was muffled and echoed in her ears. She wasn't even sure if he was really there or if it was another nightmare. She opened her eyes and stared into the darkness with the precision of a servant following the most basic of orders, regardless of the consequences.

Just do as he says, she told herself. *Mira said that it would go easier on you that way.* She laughed weakly. "You're almost dead anyway," she said to herself.

Rillan was confused. He didn't know if she was talking to him or herself. "Girl," he snapped. "Listen to me. The way for you to live is to end up like me. Choose. Death or worse?"

Aris laughed again. The hollow sound sent chills down the vampire's spine. "I don't want to die. Do you?" *I don't know*, Aris answered herself. *I don't want to be a vampire.*

Rillan thought about what she said for a long moment. A flash of Mira's face, her eyes temporarily clouded his vision. "No," he said finally. "I don't."

In one swift movement Rillan lifted his wrist to his mouth. Dozens of dagger sharp teeth lacerated his flesh. Thick, sticky blood oozed to the surface. He grabbed Aris, spinning her in his arms so that her back was to his chest, and he could hold her down. Bracing her he forced his wrist to her mouth and held her there.

At first, Aris sputtered and fought back. She couldn't breathe and felt as though she was drowning. The nearly congealed blood smeared over her tongue, cold and foul. The choice was swallow to clear her mouth and airway or stop breathing. Choking on the rancid flavor, she felt a sudden burning, her stomach heaved, and every nerve in her body instantly came to life.

Shame flooded through Rillan, he couldn't believe what he had done. With full knowledge that Aris would survive, he got up and left her to find her way through the darkness of the transformation alone.

* * * *

Lilith held the note in her hand; trembling a bit as she read the words slowly. The elders waited impatiently for Lilith to tell them what the piece of paper said. Finally, she placed the paper on the table in front of her and lifted her eyes to the concerned faces that surrounded her.

“It seems that the army has been chased away. Unfortunately, that does not mean that our trouble with the Empire has ceased. There will be more leaders, and more vendettas. Darius ap Jos lives. Where he has gone is unknown.”

“So our situation has not changed,” someone said. Relief and frustration combined oddly in his voice.

There was rumpled agreement to the statement.

“We’ve subsisted this way for as long as I’ve known. We can continue. Events are best dealt with as they come.”

“So we live. Day to day. Wait for the next threat to our existence. Hope to survive. Feed the vampire. Is that all?”

“What more do people need? We live. We live fairly well. The hand of the Empire has retracted. We should be grateful.”

“We should be considering the future. Does no one else think that waiting for the worst is not the way we should be living?”

Silence filled the room. Everyone stared expectantly at Lilith. Sighing, she lowered her eyes to her wrinkled hands, rubbing them together thoughtfully. “Since I was a girl,” she said finally, “this is how it has been. The Fates have left us to ourselves. Still, we can all see that an imposed change is imminent. I suggest we all think on it some time. We need to decide if we will try to battle the Fates and keep our solitary existence protected or accept that we will be assimilated by the Empire in time and resign to that.”

Just as the meeting was being dismissed a young woman entered the room and walked directly to Lilith. Leaning down she whispered something into the old woman's ear and handed her another note.

Lilith took the paper and quickly opened it. After scanning the paper, she cleared her throat to interrupt the confusion rumbling through the room. "A new sacrifice is needed," she said curtly. It was a rare occasion when something was able to break through Lilith's normally neutral demeanor.

"There was no body this morning."

"No," Lilith replied, "and there will not be one."

"What do you mean?"

"How many girls does the vampire need?"

"Have his demands changed?"

"What has happened?"

Lilith raised her hands, "Calm yourselves." When the random outbursts stopped she continued. "Lord Tiernay left a message that Aris has died. He says only that there will be no body. There is no more."

"That makes no sense."

"Where is her body?"

Lilith shook her head. "I don't have those answers. We'll have Mira send a new sacrifice."

"Her handfasting is tomorrow," one of the woman said sympathetically. "Perhaps we can leave it until after the ceremony."

A contemplative look overtook Lilith's features. "No," she said strongly. "I believe it would be best to have a girl sent as soon as possible. There is no telling how badly he needs the sacrifice replaced after the battle."

The sweetest sad music Lilith ever heard filtered gently through the rooms of the large roundhouse the sacrifices shared. All the girls were sitting, apparently enchanted by the sound. Some of them appeared to have tears in their eyes.

Lilith made her way to Mira's room, the apparent source of the beautiful haunting sound. Opening the door, she stared at Mira for a little while. Mira was so wrapped up in playing that she didn't notice Lilith standing there at first.

Mira stiffened. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement. Abruptly Mira stopped playing and turned toward the door. The minute she saw Lilith, a sinking feeling developed in the pit of her stomach.

"May I come in," Lilith asked with a smile.

Nodding uncertainly, Mira motioned to a small chair.

"You play beautifully. I wasn't aware that you could." Lilith walked slowly and sat as if it took a great deal of effort. Everyone was noticing Lilith looking her age more than ever.

"Some," Mira responded, obviously wanting to get to the point of the conversation and avoid small talk. "I'm still learning. Is there something you need from me?"

"Unfortunately," Lilith paused. "A new sacrifice is needed. Can you have one of the girls prepared by morning?"

Fear and confusion marred Mira's features. "I guess. But Aris—"

“Wasn’t found this morning and won’t be. There will be no body. We don’t know why; just that a new sacrifice must be sent.”

“The girls will be frightened. Changes in their routine cause problems.”

“I’m afraid,” Lilith said sympathetically, “that can’t be helped.”

Mira couldn’t take it any longer. Tears formed in her eyes. “Lilith, I can’t. I can’t send them to him.”

“Why? You’ve been chosen—“

“Because I can’t,” Mira interrupted, virtually yelling at Lilith. “He only wants someone to care for him. But if he finds that, then he gets to watch her age and die, partially because of what he uses her for. It’s not right. Not for him or any of us.”

“That’s why the lessons are meant to teach the value of sacrifice for the greater good,” Lilith replied with infinite patience. “You know as well as we all do that Lord Tiernay gave his life so that we could have a protector. The sacrifices give their lives for the same reason.”

Mira stood up, wringing her hands. “There has to be another way. I saw a-- manuscript. In the library in Rillan’s rooms. It talked about how the Circle created him. There were a number of different rites performed. It seemed that some could be performed separate from others. I was thinking. Can’t there be only one sacrifice. A girl who could feed him indefinitely?”

Lilith’s smile widened and a mysterious look twinkled in the back of her eyes. “I suppose something like that is possible. Dangerous. Still, possible. That knowledge is very carefully guarded. I’m sure you can imagine what life would be like for us, if the

wrong kind of person managed to find proof of such things. Do you truly understand what you're suggesting?"

Mira's entire body was trembling. Even so, Lilith's reaction spurred her on. It was obvious that she wasn't going to be punished for having the information. "If the wrong person acquired that kind of knowledge then the consequences could be terrible." Mira sounded as if she was reciting from an ingrained lesson. "We live our lives with the understanding that it is our mortality that makes living valuable. Without death we could lose our sense of worth." Mira moved closer to Lilith. "I understand, Lilith. Still we also believe that there is no perfect answer to everything. Maybe in this one circumstance, death isn't of as much value."

"Do you know of a woman who would commit to living for an indefinite time with the purpose of feeding a vampire? Part of the reason such a thing has never been done is because it has always been assumed that the sacrifices look forward to their death and take comfort in the knowledge that their situation cannot last forever."

"Lilith," Mira said faintly, "if he will have me—"

Standing up, Lilith placed a gentle kiss on Mira's cheek. "I believe he will. Say nothing to anyone yet. I must speak with the elders and decide how to go about this. It is a delicate thing."

"What about Liam? The handfasting?"

"Liam is a strong man. He will survive the situation, no matter what happens. Mira, please understand that there is no guarantee with this. I cannot promise that the elders will agree or that we will be capable. The knowledge of how to do what you've suggested is ancient and out of use. I suggest that you prepare a girl for sacrifice in the

morning, as though nothing has changed. She may yet be needed. I will speak to the elders and bring you the answer when I have it.”

Mira’s heart pounded in her chest. “I don’t know if I can.”

“If you are capable of standing in front of me and telling me that you would commit yourself to a vampire for all eternity and give up your soul, never to be reborn, I believe you are capable of going through the motions needed for another day’s pretense.”

Mira slumped, giving in to Lilith’s directions. With that, the old woman turned and left the room. She had a great deal of convincing and preparation to tend to.

* * * *

Aris didn’t know how long she writhed on the floor. Each new sensation was a shock to her system. Everything around her was sharp with clarity. She could see each crack in the floor through the darkness. Somewhere water dripped and splashed lightly into a puddle on the ground. A mouse scurried along the wall. Her skin alternated between scorching hot and painful cold.

Eventually she stood up and went to the mirror. She wanted to know what she looked like. *What has he done to me?*

“He cursed you. You made him angry. Now you’ll be punished for eternity.”

Aris jumped when she heard that strange laughter in the darkness again. *I can’t see myself.* She reached out and touched the glass surface of the mirror. It was unsettling to watch the dirt on her body outline her form in the mirror, but her face and body were gone.

“Why would you want to look at yourself anyway? You know what he looked like. He scared you so badly. Do you want to be frightened by your own reflection?” The voice in Aris’ ears was cruel. She didn’t even want to imagine how horrific she must appear.

“So when do you think you’ll be so hungry that you’ll kill someone?”

The blunt suggestion made her flinch. *I won’t! I can’t!*

The cruel voice continued to taunt her. “You’ll have to have your own sacrifices. Maybe the druids will give you a group of men. It would serve them right.”

I won’t do it. Why did he do this to me?

“You’ll have to do it. At least you may be able to feed off the next girl they send down here for him. They’ll have to send him someone.”

Aris imagined herself helping Rillan to drain a poor girl of all her blood. *No.* She began whimpering.

“So go help them.”

What?

“You go help all those poor girls that Mira is going to sentence to death down here. Put them out of the misery of waiting to be the next piece of meat sacrificed to the demon hiding in this darkness.”

Aris didn’t really know what she intended. Slipping out of her rooms, she found her way down the halls to the cave entrance. It was late and the moon was full in the sky. Continually egged on by the evil voice in her mind, she ventured silently through town to the large round house she spent so much of her life in.

Creeping into the first room was the most difficult. Aris hovered, frightened, over the sleeping forms of two of the girls. Suddenly the night erupted in screaming and blood. Aris didn't know where it was coming from, but it tore through her. She wanted to hide in a corner and pull blankets up over her head. She remembered opening her eyes to see bodies. *So many bodies*, she thought. *Bloody and torn apart. Who would do something like that?* She felt sick to her stomach.

"You would," the voice tormented. "You're a vampire. You kill people. But you're better than Rillan ap Tiernay. He kills on command. You saved them. Saved them from him."

Aris nodded to the voice. It made some sense.

Terror filled screams woke Mira from her sleep. At first, she believed that one of the girls must be having a nightmare. Mira got up and ran from her room to find whoever was dreaming so horribly that it would cause the cries she heard.

By the time Mira made it to the main room, a deadly silence had descended on the round house. She stumbled over something in the darkness and stepped in a puddle of warm liquid. Looking down, she found a body. "By all the Gods," Mira swore under her breath. There was no point checking to see if the girl was still alive. She had been ripped apart.

Gathering all her strength, Mira made her way through the room in the direction that the last of the screaming came from. "Maybe the screaming was mine, and I'm dreaming now," she suggested to herself.

Noticing a door slightly ajar, Mira nudged it open. If not for the time she spent with Rillan, Mira may have screamed when she saw Aris. The girl was naked. Her pale

skin was bathed in blood. A trickle of red dribbled from the corner of her fanged mouth, down her chin and neck, across her chest, and dripped from her nipple. Her limbs seemed longer, contorted, as she bent over the body of her latest victim. Suddenly she turned toward Mira. Black empty eye sockets, sunken into pasty white flesh, pulled taught over skeletal features stared back at her. Aris' lipless mouth appeared to almost smile at Mira, as the vampire turned and began walking toward her.

Mira stood stiff and frightened. *Do I really want to give myself to this for all eternity?* She had no idea what to do. Aris' intent was obvious. Mira was convinced that her death was imminent. She backed away slowly, as if trying to get away from a wild animal, knowing that turning and running would only cause the creature to give chase. From nowhere, light streamed into the room. There was a flurry of motion and a virtual army of people flooded the room, attacking the vampire.

Not having weapons, the men resorted to throwing their lanterns at the monster. Fire erupted around the room and at her feet. Aris screamed in pain, as flames enveloped the room and smoke began to fill the air.

Mira felt arms around her and looked up to see Liam appear from the smoke and shadows. Huddling in his arms, she allowed herself to be led from the room. Outside the round house a crowd gathered. The entire house was burning to the ground. Men took turns running into the crumbling building to try and find survivors. After a short time, they decided that there were none, save Mira.

"Are you alright?"

"What," Mira asked, blinking her eyes at the growing flames.

Liam forced her to face him. "Are you alright?"

“Aris is a vampire,” she said with a shudder.

Liam’s gaze refocused on the burning round house. “I think Aris was a vampire.”

“How can you be sure? We got out,” Mira insisted frantically.

Suddenly a thought occurred to her. “My whistle,” she cried and tried to break free of Liam’s grasp.

“Mira! Get a hold of yourself. You can’t go in there. It’s gone.”

Finally she stopped fighting him and collapsed into his arms crying. “I can’t believe this has happened. I hope Rillan is alright.”

“Come with me,” he said, ignoring her last comment. “You’ll stay in my family house tonight. You’ll be part of the family soon enough.”

Mira barely protested. She was so tired she thought she might collapse and fall asleep in the clearing beside the burning round house.

The fire raged on through the night. It was all they could do to keep it from consuming the other buildings nearby. With the breaking of day, the druids found themselves sifting through the ashes, trying to account for bodies and attempting to determine if the vampire died in the flames or not.

Chapter 15

“Absolutely not,” growled an ancient voice from the back of the room. Echoes of agreement bounced from one side of the room to the other.

Lilith waited for the group to calm down. “I fully expected the reaction would be thus. Still, I propose that we all consider what I suggest.” Knowing the value of letting others come to the correct decision on their own better than most, Lilith sat and allowed the various factions to argue.

“It certainly would solve a couple problems. Firstly, we wouldn’t have to worry about sacrifices any longer. Secondly, if we wanted him to leave, he could.”

“At the very same time, what prohibits him from merely going at that point, whether we want him to or not?”

More rumbling filled the room, while people voiced their concerns about giving Rillan a way to be free of them.

“We still need protection.”

“Well maybe this kind of protection isn’t right any longer.”

“What do you propose?”

“Get rid of the vampire. If we’re going to start using the ancient rites again, then perhaps there would be a better solution to our protection than the vampire.”

“Yes, something not so frighteningly dangerous.”

“We need an army.”

“An army whose loyalty is in the right place.”

“One that can’t be bought off.”

“An army that doesn’t need our blood!”

“Give him Mira.”

“Yes, give her to him.”

“She wants to go. Let her.”

Lilith waited until the general consensus seemed to favor sending Mira back to Rillan. “I wish it to be made clear what we are suggesting here. Immortality is not a gift given lightly. Our people decided long ago that death is necessary to bring meaning to life. Without it, we found that people fell into patterns of depravity. Without consequence it is difficult for a human mind to resolve questions of morality. Rillan ap Tiernay was made into a monster on purpose. It was believed that his existence in death would remind him what he was granted.”

There was silence in the room. Most of the elders at some point were told the origins of the vampire and why the ancients had chosen to create such a thing. Even so, those lessons were long ago, and no one in the room seemed even a little hesitant to revisit the rites.

Lilith could almost see the thoughts floating about the heads in the room. “Do we still want to grant Mira something so precious as eternal life?”

“Lilith?” The voice that spoke was small and quiet. The woman who spoke rarely said anything, but when she spoke everyone listened. It was assumed that she would one day take Lilith’s place. “Why do you insist upon leading us all by the nose? This is the point where the room has been cued to argue that Mira’s consequence is to live eternally with the vampire and is therefore just as cursed as his existence. You have your way on this. I believe that the entire room has agreed. Enough guided debate. You skirt the true issue. We may have unleashed another.”

No one wanted to speak to the thought that Aris may have survived the fire. Now it had been said aloud.

The small woman continued to speak. "So we create a companion for Rillan. And we face the possibility that Aris has escaped, and we've unleashed something terrible. Is that a topic we are going to discuss? Is there even anything to discuss? Can we change it?"

Arguing continued for hours. Loudly and quietly, sometimes even violently, people proposed solutions to dealing with the possibility that an insane vampire had escaped their village.

* * * *

The storm threatened all afternoon. Darius ap Jos watched the sky through the tree branches, with an impending sense of foreboding. It was nearly dark enough to call it evening instead of afternoon. With a sudden thunderclap, the sky opened up. Even the cover of the forest foliage wasn't enough to keep the rain from soaking through his cloak.

"Fucking hired Empire scum," Darius swore to himself. *"If they had only listened to me."*

Spending most of his time walking in unknown directions, scavenging food, and blaming the Empire for his failure was leaving a bad taste in his mouth. It was all he could do to keep himself from believing that Marcus had sent the storm. No matter how he tried, Darius couldn't think his way out of this one. He wasn't welcome at the Circle, and he was no longer welcome in the Empire. When the drugs wore off and Marcus realized what actually happened, there may actually be a price placed on Darius' head.

"I will find a way. When I do, they'll all pay."

Spotting a small cave mouth in the side of a hill, Darius ducked in out of the rain, praying that it wasn't occupied. It looked the perfect home for a bear or worse. Even with the prospect of running into an unfriendly animal, the rain was more than enough incentive for Darius to chance the encounter and head for the shelter.

"Who is he," Aris asked herself under her breath. Rain pounded so loudly she almost didn't hear the strange voice.

He looks familiar. I don't really know.

"Poor soul. He's so wet and bedraggled. You could help him."

How?

"No one wants to wander alone. You certainly don't."

Do you think he would want to come with me?

"Of course. What man wouldn't want what you can give? What woman wouldn't want it?"

I don't, Aris whispered.

"You're a cowardly child. Anyone else would give anything to live forever. Even their very souls."

I don't think they would.

"You don't know human nature very well. Trust me. Have I lied to you?"

No.

"Well then?"

Somewhere in the black of the cave Darius thought he may have heard something. Turning he stared into the abyssal darkness. Nothing.

* * * *

Even Helen tried to convince Liam to wait for the elders.

Adamantly Liam shook his head. "They all knew when the handfasting was to take place. It isn't necessary for them to be here. I'm not waiting for anything else to go wrong."

All of the decorations had been washed away by the storm. Mira loved the clean smell of rain. It was as if the Fates were reassuring her that the ceremony wouldn't happen. The entire clearing was a mess of trampled scattered plants and flowers. Even so, there was no convincing Liam that the ceremony wasn't going to happen. "It's alright Helen," Mira said softly. She fiddled with the pendant around her neck as she spoke, not really looking at anything. "The Fates seem to rule my future no matter what I do. If this is what is meant to happen—"

"Finally some sense," Liam interrupted. He took Mira's hands in his, tearing her fingers away from the pendant. It fell in slow motion to land on Mira's chest between her breasts. As he took her hands, the surrounding druids began to sing.

No joy or true feeling could be heard in the song. The druids were tired and upset that Liam was being so insistent. He hadn't even listened, when he was warned that after such tragedy and upset there was very little chance that they would be able to summon any of the fey.

Voices droned on into the stormy sky, singing the familiar words without emotion, and a few sparkling lights began to blink and flicker around them.

“That’s enough, Liam.” Lilith’s voice brought an end to the song and the ceremony without hesitation.

“What do you mean by this?” Liam seemed on the verge of tears. “I thought we had your blessing Lilith.”

“Liam,” Lilith sighed in obvious frustration. She rarely allowed her emotions to show through. Between the meeting she just left and Liam rushing into the handfasting, she was losing her patience. “Even if the elders had no ulterior motives in canceling your handfasting, I venture to guess that you are intelligent enough to recognize that Mira is the only sacrifice left. Is there any chance that you may have attempted to push this through before the meeting finished in the vain hope that if you had already staked your claim to her we may not send her back to the vampire?”

If not for the anger in her tone, Liam may have tried to deny the accusations. But he would have been lying, and it was obvious that would only make matters worse. Releasing Mira’s hands, the cord meant to bind them together fell to the ground at their feet. “Mira,” he said softly, not able to look her in the eyes.

“I’m sorry Liam. This wasn’t meant to be.” Mira wished she could take his pain away. He merely had the bad luck of being in the middle of a very difficult situation.

“He’ll never be able to love you the way I could have,” Liam said softly.

Reaching up, Mira brushed Liam’s hair back from his face and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. “Perhaps not. Still, I need to let him try. You don’t have to understand.”

“That’s good,” he answered angrily. Finally he looked up at her, tears on his cheeks; his eyes hard as steel. “I never will.” Liam turned away and left the stones.

Mira faced Lilith. Excitement starting to build in her chest, even through the concern she felt for Liam. "Is there nothing that can be done for him?"

"Your heart is too good at times child." Lilith shook her head. "There's no need. He'll get over this and take a different wife. He'll be fine. Liam is a good strong man. He'll learn that he's capable of loving another, in time."

Mira nodded. "I guess this means that I'm going back?" Fear and anticipation blended together in a frustrating combination that twisted in her stomach.

Lilith started into her eyes as if she was reading the motivations there. "Yes. The elders have decided to send you back. There is some preparation that must be done. Return here at sunset."

Dismissal obvious in Lilith's voice, Mira walked past the parade of various elders who were entering the stone circle. Each of them eyed her curiously. Sunset seemed to be forever away.

* * * *

"What have I done?"

It took Rillan far too long to realize that Aris left. Barely enough light streamed into the cave mouth to show that day had come. However, it was enough to keep him inside. Roaring with frustration, Rillan turned toward the darkness and stomped back down the hall. There was nothing else he could do about the situation right now. He couldn't decide if he should go after her come nightfall or if he should notify the elders and wait for their direction.

She could be anywhere, by the time they get back to me with any kind of decision. I'm not supposed to leave the caves unless under direct order. Rillan

wrestled with himself. *Play the part of the mindless servant--* Stopping in midstride, Rillan tried to get a hold of himself. He could feel the anger boiling throughout his body. He wanted nothing more than to bring the entire mountain down on himself and lay buried for a few centuries. *Why shouldn't I be mindless? Look what I do when I think. Drive them insane, drive them away, kill them, bleed them...* Roaring pain and aggravation echoed down the halls and out the cave mouth.

Exploding down the hall Rillan began tearing at tapestries. He knocked a number of doors off hinges and burst into his practice room. Wood splintered, metal crashed against walls, fabric ripped and riddled the floor. Centuries of collecting was destroyed in moments.

* * * *

The standing stones glistened with the remnants of the afternoon rainfall. Mira stood perfectly still, white shift blowing in the breeze. No one asked if she wanted to change her mind. No one spoke directly to her. She watched with a combination of awe and fear, while the elders finished placing small clay bowls containing mud-like mixtures at the base of each of the nine stones.

The druids moving amongst the stones sang softly in unison. Mira thought she recognized the words, but somehow they didn't make sense. Slowly the entire circle began to shift around her. The ground seemed to move. Mira opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't find her voice. No one else appeared to notice. They all went about their tasks with efficiency. Finishing, they each turned to face Mira and closed in around her.

Mira's perspective shifted, and she found herself looking down on the ceremony from above. With detached curiosity, she watched the druids remove her shift. Standing naked amongst them, she was suddenly grateful for the strange dizzying sensations. One of the men produced a bowl of the mud colored substance. Each of the druids dipped fingers in the bowl and began drawing runes over Mira's body.

Muddy runes covered Mira's breasts and stomach, ran down her arms and legs, dripped along her back and across her buttocks and thighs. As the druids finished the runes on her body, tiny lights began to blink around the circle. With the song's crescendo, the lights solidified. Tiny fey circled frantically, dipping close to Mira.

Distracted by the fey, Mira didn't notice when all the druids left the circle. As each of the small fey blinked out of sight, Mira found herself standing alone. The muddy runes burned into her skin. Her shift was at her feet, and the moon was nearly at its apex.

Confusion coursed through her. Embarrassed by her nakedness, Mira grabbed up her shift and pulled it on. Gauging by the moon, Mira guessed that she had been in the stone circle for hours. *I don't feel any different*, she thought with concern, though that was the only truly coherent thought process she could manage.

Not wanting to return to Liam's home and having nowhere else in the village to go, Mira's thoughts turned toward Rillan, the cave, and what she had come to regard as comforting darkness. *I'm to go to him. Should I wait for the ceremony? There's nowhere else to go. I should ask Lilith.*

Stumbling from the stones, Mira tripped her way down the forest path toward the village. When she finally looked up, she found herself standing outside the gate that

surrounded the cave mouth. One of the young women who attended to Lilith stood silently staring at Mira. A ghostly expression fogged her beautiful brown eyes. Trance-like she swung the gate wide.

Her actions were almost frightening to Mira. Confused by the strange behavior of the girl at the gate, Mira virtually ran to the cave. Stumbling haphazardly down the hall, Mira tried to call out to Rillan, but her voice continued to fail her.

Entering the main halls, Mira began to wonder if she was hallucinating in addition to the shifting floors. In the black Mira tripped over tapestries that should have been on the walls, splintered wood that should have been doors, and other piles of things she couldn't identify. It was getting harder and harder for her to keep her feet. Mira had no idea how long she stumbled about in the dark. If not for how well she knew the halls, Mira figured that she would have been lost to the darkness.

Between the effects of the ceremony and the strange piles of rubble in the halls Mira found herself more and more confused. It seemed to take forever, but she managed to find her way to her bedroom door. A sense of comfort and safety flooded her senses, when she moved down the hall to her bed chamber. *At least this hall is free of clutter and rubble.* Stubbing her foot on the corner post of her bed, Mira fell onto the soft silken sheets.

The last thing she remembered was hearing terrifying shrieking reverberate through the halls. *Rillan will protect me*, she thought confidently, ignoring the frightening sound, pulling the blankets up around her shoulders, and allowing sleep to take her.

* * * *

Waking from a fitful sleep, Rillan found himself sitting in a corner of his bedroom beneath a pile of books. His head throbbed. Vaguely, he remembered having a great deal to drink and then trying to find a solution to his existence in one of the many useless books in his library. There were a few manuscripts sorted apart from the others. After a few moments of gathering his wits, Rillan stood, collected the leather bound texts, and went looking for his bed.

Rillan stared at the ceiling. He refused to look at the mess he was going to have to clean up. *At least fixing the mess should keep my mind off everything that caused the mess in the first place*, he thought with little actual hope. The rising sun peaking at the edge of the open shaft urged Rillan to move.

With a heavy sigh, Rillan considered the next thing he should do, as he picked his way through the mess on his floor to the shaft and forced the door shut. *At least I didn't knock this door off its hinges*, he thought. With the shaft covered, he began a list in his mind. *I'll write a note to the druids to tell them about Aris. If they don't already know. Then I'll get to work putting this disorder right.* He laughed sardonically. *Maybe I'll wait for the next sacrifice and have her clean it all up.*

After a long day of repentant tidying in his bedroom, Rillan wrote a very matter of fact note and sealed it, before leaving his rooms and walking down the halls toward the entrance to leave the note for the druids. At first he couldn't place what was wrong. There was so much chaos in the hall that he didn't notice, until he was on his way back to his room. *Mira's rooms. Was I in there? When did I leave the door open?*

Placing his hand on the door handle, he almost pulled the door shut, assuming that he had been the one to leave it open. But he couldn't remember having gone into

her rooms. There was a minute hope in the back of his mind that he refused to admit to. *Perhaps I've gotten lucky, and that girl isn't gone after all. If I get hold of her and destroy her, then I might not have to admit to the druids what I did,* he thought shamefully.

Seeing the lump in the bed dredged up all the anger from the night before. Tears formed in his eyes. He refused to allow himself to think that it might be Mira. *That vampire bitch has no right to be in her bed,* Rillan's thoughts were like acid in his head. Furiously, he threw the blankets back. Standing stunned, he didn't know how to react at first.

Sudden cold woke Mira from her nightmares of fangs and blood. Opening her eyes to blackness, she could imagine Rillan standing over her. *I wish I had started a fire,* she thought. Her mind raced with uncertainty. Finally she decided that he had to be there. No other explanation made sense. "Rillan," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I was the only sacrifice left."

"What?" All Rillan could think was, *she's back. Why is she back?*

The annoyed sound of his voice sent a jolt through Mira's body, and she forgot her fear. Rising to her knees on the bed, she moved toward the sound, reaching out she found the blanket first and took it from his hand. She didn't know what to say or how to make him understand what she had done and why she was here.

Rillan reached out and stroked the hair back from her face. "I believe I could be lost in those deep brown eyes."

Mira smiled, feeling his gentle touch and hearing the need in his voice. Placing her hand on the back of his, she closed her eyes and nuzzled her cheek against his palm. "I missed you," she admitted.

"I don't believe I will ever understand you," he answered. Leaning down he kissed her forehead, her temple, her cheek, and finally her lips.

Passionate fire exploded in Mira's chest and burned its way throughout her body. Her breathing grew shallow. She was scared to open her eyes, not wanting to find herself dreaming. *I can't believe how much I missed this.*

Mira felt the shift being pulled from her. She waited impatiently to feel his hands on her body. She knew they would be cold, at first. Met with nothing but air, she fidgeted. "Rillan?"

"What have you done," he said breathlessly.

"Nothing. What do you mean?"

"You're covered in runes, Mira." She flinched at the anger in his voice. "What did you let them do to you?"

"I wanted to be with you," she said, finding a strength in her voice that she didn't realize was there. "Now. Like this. I can always be with you. No more sacrifices. I'm the last."

Rillan stared at her horrified. "You don't know what you've done."

"I know better than you or any of the others think."

"I know you fear me, Mira. I feel you tremble when I feed on you. You can't survive an eternity of that. No matter what they may have changed you into. No one could." Rillan sounded as if he was pleading with her to change her mind.

“Don’t underestimate me. It’s too late. I feel no remorse,” she told him. “I did what must be done, because no one else can.”

“What did you say?” *How many times over the centuries have I told myself that? Maybe it takes the Fates centuries to create two people capable of this kind of life.*

Mira didn’t answer him. He didn’t need her to. She heard and felt the sound of his clothing being pulled from his body. The rustle of fabric dropping to the floor sparked a warm pleasurable anticipation in her belly.

Shocking cold flesh against hers made Mira gasp. *I’ll have to make sure he doesn’t get this deprived of blood in the future*, she thought with amusement. His arms wrapped around her, and his lips peppered kisses along her neck. Mira let her head fall back, trusting him, as he pulled her down onto her bed.

Rillan felt the heat of her body flood into him. She was so warm it almost burned to press against her. For the first time in the whole of his beastly existence, he didn’t find himself wrestling with the vampire for control.

Moving down along her body, Rillan gently urged her legs apart. Mira’s breath came in short sharp gasps. Her hands reached out in the darkness to find him. She felt him lower himself between her legs. It was too long since the last time he tasted her, heard her whimper in excitement, or felt her needy touch. Her scent shot through him, driving him on.

Mira flinched when his cold tongue drew a tentative circle around her clit. Try as she might, she couldn’t help the moans of pleasure that erupted from her body. Rillan sucked her clit into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue as he gently sucked. His hands

slid up her legs and cupped her butt, holding her tightly to him. Squirming in his intense grip, she couldn't escape, not that she truly wanted to.

As Mira's reactions to his mouth calmed, Rillan shifted his grip on her. Sliding one hand around her thigh, he stroked up her leg and parted her wet lips with one finger. In a swift gentle movement, he pressed his finger inside her, and began stroking the soft spot inside her. Within moments Mira convulsed, drew in a sharp breath and began trembling with the release.

Feeling the walls inside her grip his finger, Rillan intensified his sucking. She tried to pull away from him. The pleasure was near pain, when he dragged her release out and caused a second peak in climax. Mira pushed at his head, trying to stop him.

Finally, smile splitting his face, Rillan let her go, but only long enough for him to move back up her body and position himself to enter her. Mira felt as though the bed was spinning. Before she could get a grip on herself, she felt Rillan's cock glide inside her. Mira gripped his arms and braced herself as he began moving against her, slowly at first and then with more force. The time he spent with his face between her legs had him ready before he even started. Rillan held back only as long as it took for her to come one more time. Her writhing beneath him was more than he could handle. Rillan released into her, letting his cold dead seed fill her body, and feeling her warmth wrap around him.

He wasn't actually sure that he heard it. She was so quiet. In the intense aftermath, just as he was collapsing onto her body, trying to control his fall so as not to put too much weight on her, Rillan could have sworn she said, "I love you."

Epilogue

Lilith found herself at the head of the elders' council table once again. Years wearing on her caused her handwriting to shake. Still she believed that this letter should be penned personally. Folding the paper over, she sealed it and handed it to the girl who waited patiently to deliver it.

"Now," Lilith intoned. Her voice reverberated in the silence of the room. "I know we're all concerned about this decision. I urge you all to stay yourselves before leaving this room. We will need to provide a strong front to reassure the populace that this is the correct course of action. That at least we all agree on."

The quiet rumble of reluctant consensus was interrupted, when one of the older men at the table cleared his throat. "Lilith," he replied in a voice that was far stronger than his fragile appearance would have suggested. "It's not the vampire we're concerned with. You know that."

Lilith sighed. She appeared much older. "Change weighs heavily on me," she said. "I'll hear all suggestions."

"His replacement should be less violent."

"Should be loyal without our having to hold something over his head. Feeding the vampire kept it faithful, but hurt our people." There was wide agreement on that thought.

"His replacement should be strong enough to do all that the vampire did, but not so frightening."

“There should be more than one. I’ll not support creation of a creature whose very existence is loneliness and torture.”

One voice harrumphed. “Some of the things you’re all suggesting we dispense with were put in place by the ancients to allow us to control the beast.”

“I agree,” someone else chimed in, “there must be some balance. We can’t create something so incredibly powerful as the vampire, but without any of the consequences to his existence.”

A heavy silence descended on the room. No one knew what to do, and none of them had ever experienced so little guidance from Lilith.

“I’m just as concerned for the situation as the rest of you,” Lilith said. “If we are to preserve our peaceful existence we need an army. Not just any army, but one capable of standing up to armor and an advancing world outside of the Circle. We want an army that we will not feel guilty for bringing into existence. We’re asking the Fates to bring us a solution that will simply be a strong military breed who will choose to protect us and act with temperance and logic as we would. We want ourselves to be an army, but we don’t want to pick up weapons. There isn’t a mind at this table able to come to a solution which resolves this issue. The two thoughts are naturally opposed.”

Everyone in the room could feel the frustration in her voice. “We need to consider one thing that no one has mentioned.”

Lilith turned toward Alwyn and smiled wryly. She already knew what the small woman was suggesting. “We need a protector capable of standing up to the vampire. Just in case one of them returns.”

“We also need to consider that Rillan ap Tiernay may not be capable of dealing with Aris. Or worse, that Aris may create more vampires before he can destroy her.”

The matter of fact tone in Alwyn’s voice sent chills down everyone’s spine. “We need to consider the possibility that there will be an entire army of vampires. I personally don’t see the sense in creating another breed that may be able to multiply as easily as the vampire or cause as much damage as the vampire. To some extent I believe we’ve done enough damage pretending that we can stall the Fates. Perhaps we should consider resigning to our philosophies and allow the Fates to guide our existence. I even dare to suggest that the ancients laid aside the knowledge you’re all considering evoking for a reason.”

The debate went on all evening. The elders were scared. This was the first time the Circle had been truly threatened since the creation of the vampire.

“Perhaps Alwyn is right.”

A shrill scream shattered the tense silence in the room. After some confusion, the elders flooded out of the council round house into the night. All around the village people were coming out into the night and searching frightfully for the source of the scream.

A terrible feeling turned Lilith’s stomach, when she spotted two figures disappearing into the tree line. Fortunately everyone’s attention was diverted by the gruesome scene at a nearby roundhouse. From what Lilith could tell no one else saw the two figures.

Picking her way through the crowd, Lilith arrived at the door of Liam's family home. Liam stood at the doorway, holding Helen and comforting her. Apparently Helen was the one who screamed.

A set of bloody footprints led to the pair. Lilith followed Helen's horrific trail into the round house. Upon entering the house, a distinct metallic odor assailed Lilith's senses. The bloody footprints led into the bedroom which belonged to Liam and Helen's mother. The woman had been very sick since the death of her husband, and nothing that had been done for her seemed to be helping her recover. It was all Lilith could do to keep from losing her stomach contents.

Never had Lilith seen such carnage in the whole of her life. No wild animal ever did to a person what was done to the matriarch of the household. Liam's mother was ripped apart. Pieces of her were scattered around the room, and blood splattered walls and ceiling. Entrails led from the body across the floor. It almost looked like the body had been fought over. The only thing that was worse than what Lilith could see was the fact that there were things she couldn't see. Specifically, pieces were missing. The woman's chest was torn open, and her heart was missing. Her skull had been shattered, and her brain was nowhere in the room. What's more, even though there was blood, there wasn't nearly as much as should have been coating the floors, after a body was shredded like this.

Turning away from the nightmare, Lilith left the house, wiping tears from her cheeks as she went. Emerging from the house, Lilith stared up at the moonlight sky. Gazing at the starry night, the world almost seemed to be okay with what happened. *Is*

this truly what the Fates want for us, she asked herself. Are we paying for what we created? Was it so wrong?

As if answering her thoughts, a lone wolf howled into the night sky. The beautiful wolf song almost sounded mournful. It was as if the creature knew the tragedy and was questioning the Fates as well.

“Lilith?”

The elder refocused her gaze and found Liam standing in front of her. His face was angry, but resigned.

Having her attention, Liam cleared his throat. “Lilith, I know the elders are debating what is to come next. No one is saying it, but everyone is scared. If the Empire doesn’t take us over, the vampire appears to be willing to eat us. I want to be part of what is done. Please. Tell me we’re not just going to accept this.”

So it seems that the population of the village knows more than the elders believe about what goes on in the council round house, Lilith thought sadly. So much for protecting them. “Alright Liam. Come with me.”

Leaving the distraught Helen with a small group of women to organize the cleaning of the mess, Lilith suggested that a group of men get together and create a watch for the rest of the night.

Lilith led the elders and Liam back to the council round house. Her confident demeanor had returned and put the elders more at ease than they had been in days. Once everyone was seated Lilith stood and looked them over. “I understand Alwyn’s concerns, and to some extent agree with her. However, I am unwilling to lie down and accept this change. I will concede to the decision of this council if that’s what you wish.”

“Lilith, you must have some new thought on the matter or you would not be speaking thusly.”

Smiling Lilith looked to Alwyn. Philosophy of acceptance or not, no one wanted to die or be forced to hand their knowledge over to the people in the Empire’s senate. When no word of protest came, Lilith continued. “I believe that Liam ap Arnauk and the wolves are our answer.”

* * * *

Letter in hand, Mira quickly navigated the familiar halls. She could guess what the letter said. There were only so many reasons the druids contacted Rillan. Now that the sacrifices were no longer necessary, this could be only one thing.

Mira pushed open the door to Rillan’s practice room. Even with her upset about the apparent news, she had to smile watching him busily cleaning the mess. It had taken weeks to clean up the halls and rooms he trashed in his anger. Still he did it all with a relatively good humor. The frequent breaks to make sure the beds were still in working order didn’t hurt either.

Rillan knelt on the floor next to the practice dummy gathering the pieces into a pile. He couldn’t stop smiling, and his face hurt. Without looking up he said aloud, “I don’t think my cheeks are used to being happy.”

Chuckling, Mira leaned down and held out the letter, kissing him on the cheek. “Not that I want to change that attitude,” she teased. “But I think this might fix it for you.”

Rillan’s brow furrowed, when he looked up from the shards of armor to see what Mira was talking about. He couldn’t help the low annoyed growl that issued from deep

in his chest. "Of course we can't be left alone for long." Standing, he unceremoniously took the letter from her hands, broke the seal, and flipped the paper open.

Patiently Mira watched him read. Rillan's expression was nearly impossible to interpret. Finally, he let the hand with the letter in it drop to his side. Without looking at Mira, he cast a gaze around the room.

"You look as though you're thinking very hard," Mira said with a note of worry.

"I guess I am," he sighed. "It may sound odd, but I've grown rather used to this place."

"What? You're not making much sense." Mira placed a hand on his cheek, drawing his eyes to look into hers. "What's going on?"

"The Circle has decided that I've become a liability. They suggest that I take care of the problem I created..."

"And?" Mira prompted when his sentence trailed off.

"And I'm not to come back when it's done." Rillan read the letter one more time. Then folded it carefully and placed it in his pocket. The corner of his mouth rounded up in a half smile. Reaching out, he took Mira's hand. "I actually expected something like this to happen someday. In the very beginning, I thought they would be done with me much sooner than this. As the years continued and began bleeding together, I adapted and waited. My first thought was to where we could go." Rillan lifted her hand to his lips and placed a gentle kiss on her palm. "But as I think about it," he continued, dragging his lips to her wrist and placing another kiss there, "we can go anywhere you like."

Mira smiled, leaned in and kissed his cheek. "So it seems that we're free to live our lives without the killing?"

Rillan nodded and grabbed her up into his arms, swinging her around, and making her giggle.

"So where do we go first," Mira asked, suddenly excited.

Putting her down, Rillan's face took on an apologetic expression. "I think the Circle is right. We should deal with Aris."

Mira smiled widely. Although the topic was unpleasant and Rillan sounded so upset and guilty, he had said 'we.' "Well, even though there is some unpleasantness to deal with," Mira said cheerily, "when it's over, there will be you and I, forever."

"You truly are happy with that?"

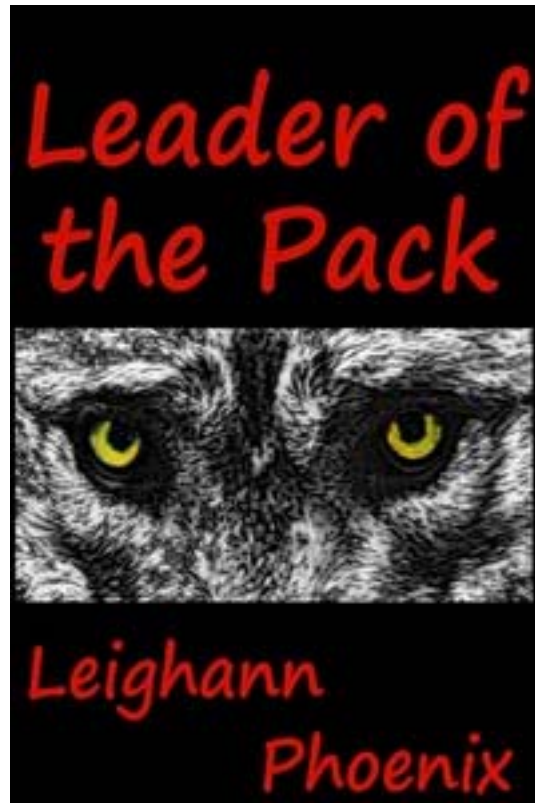
Staring him in the eyes, Mira placed her hands on his shoulders and drew him closer. "Forever," she whispered.

The End

ABOUT LEIGHANN PHOENIX

It's always the quiet girl. She sits in the back of the class or stands at the bar, while her friends all mingle. She's the one mom always said was a "good girl," and all her friends believe is a prude. Leighann Phoenix has been writing since she was a child. The passion and pain reflected in her writing are little glimpses of what's lurking just beneath the surface. Her publications to date will be left in the dark where they belong. The new incarnation of her writing burns with a fire of it's own.

If you enjoyed MIRA, you might also enjoy:



LEADER OF THE PACK
By Leighann Phoenix

Running for her life, hiding as a waitress in a sleazy bar, Aislinn never dreamed she would meet her soul mate. Compelled to save her, Cullen finds himself inexorably drawn to this mysterious woman. Aislinn believed her life couldn't get any stranger than it already was, until she happened across Cullen. As Aislinn discovers her lost past and Cullen works to protect his pack, they find themselves stronger together than they ever were apart. Now they just have to convince the pack elders that the alpha werewolf in the pack should be mated to a supposedly human girl.

Warning: This title contains graphic language, nonconsensual, f/f and group sex.

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This is a highly intricate, imaginative story, peppered throughout with spicy interludes. This is a love story full of violence, anguish, betrayal and secrets. Not a walk through the park to read at an estimated 8-12 hours for the average reader, this book is well worth the time and effort. And I definitely detect a sequel in the future.

[Review by Sandy Potterton, Dark Angel Reviews, 5/5 Angels](#)

...A monster of a story with multiple plot lines, mystery, romance, danger and magic! I loved the richness of her characters, the unrelenting action and the heartwarming romance...an intriguing world of danger, betrayal, love and friendship I would certainly love to visit again.

[Review by Dawn D, Manic Readers Reviews, 4/5 stars](#)

Leighann Phoenix has created a fascinating world of werewolves and magic, with enough action, sex and danger to keep you on the edge of your seat. The complex internal politics of the pack were well crafted, and the glimpses of day-to-day life (werewolves running casinos) were fun to read as well. Following along as Aislinn comes into her true power, and Cullen protects his pack from external enemies proves to be a thrilling ride. Does true love prevail? You bet and getting there is well worth the trip.

EXCERPT from Leader of the Pack:

Aislinn approached the new guy who sat down at the bar near the wall. He was impressive. His presence caused most of the other patrons to make more than enough room for him, resulting in an unnatural amount of space at that end of the bar. Aislinn was perfectly happy to have a short lull in the number of people she had to deal with.

The man was pretty big, even sitting on the stool. He had black hair, brown-black eyes, and tanned skin. He looked hard muscled even under the black leather duster he was wearing. But the strangest thing was this ageless appearance to him. At first look she might have said he was in his late twenties/early thirties. Then, at second glance, he looked almost 100. Whether that was normal for him or due to the fact that he just had the worst day of his life was up for grabs. "What can I get you?"

The guy looked up at her as if he only just realized that he was in a bar. Aislinn waited and when he didn't respond she asked again. "What can I get you?"

Cullen stared appraisingly at the girl speaking to him. She had an odd scent. It was hard to make out between the rancid smell of the bar, the smoke from the people around him soaking into everything, and some awful perfume she seemed to have bathed in. But there was something to it that caught his attention. She was attractive, but she wasn't remarkable in any way. She had brown hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and medium build. She wasn't his type. I would probably break her, he thought and grinned at himself. Besides she wasn't what he was here for. The last thing he wanted was a woman tonight. No matter how intriguing her scent was...

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